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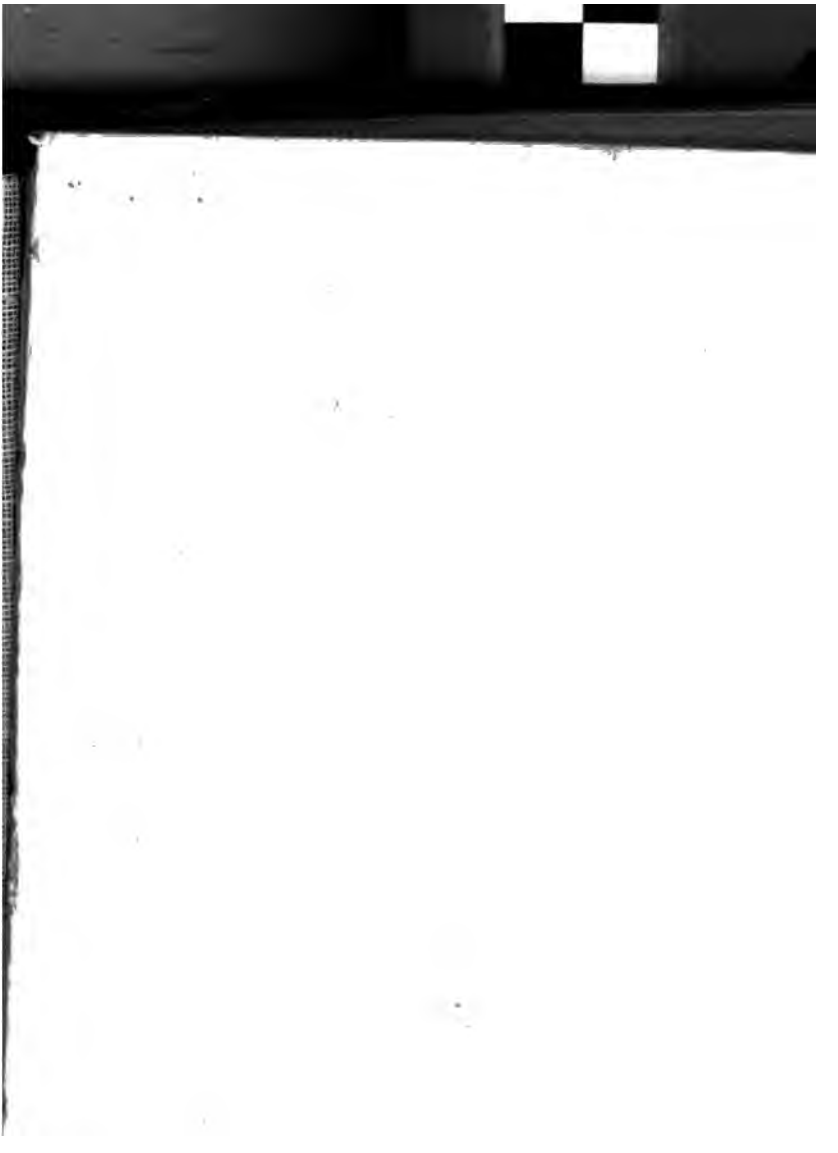

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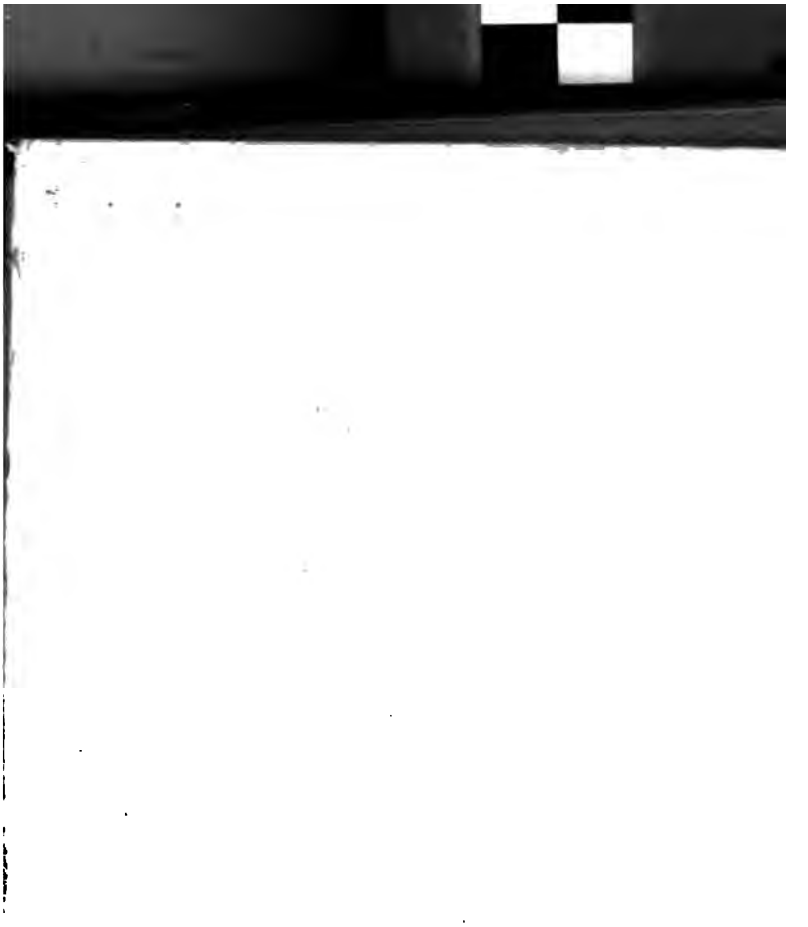

THE MOUNTAINS OF THE MORNING

By

GUY FITCH PHELPS

Illustrated by

GEORGE T. TOBIN

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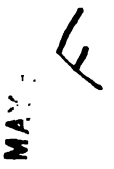

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CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

WAYNE NORTON rode into the Pass of the Lone Pine and dismounted. A deer feeding near a spring lifted its head, gazed a moment, then tripped around the hill. A family of grouse moved in the weeds at the edge of an aspen grove, picking the buds and early seeds.

He was weary with the long climb up the ranges, and his horse was hungry. Throwing the bridle reins on the ground, he removed his hat and took the breeze. One arm rested in the cant of the saddle, the other went to his hip in an easy position. Gray cliffs rose about him in craggy tumult, resembling the dismantled walls of ancient castles. Here and there a stunted evergreen found anchor in some crevice. Gay vines looped from rock to rock, while far above a collection of white sticks showed where an eagle had made her nest.

A light breeze stole through the pass. From the shade of a squawberry thicket a lark rose, singing happily in the June air. Behind stretched a wilderness of sharp peaks, showing where the great Saw Tooth Range dropped down into the fathomless southwest. To the north heaved illimitably the blue bulk of the Bitter Root. Far beneath, the Valley of the Silver Bow lay smiling in billowing glory. Running at right angles to the range, the river had made a passage for itself through the hills, plunging into the mightier

floods to the west. The mountains drew back generously, permitting the broad meadows and green bottom lands to stretch themselves between. Tall balms and cottonwoods fringed the stream, winding in and out through the lush lowlands, and back of these trailed the airy grace of willows.

Norton stood entranced, thrilled; his pulse quickened and he breathed through parted lips. Over the wide, clean land Beauty walked in golden sandals. He had read of it all in the far-off seminary, but now he was looking upon it in all its sibylline wonder. When, in that other day, the call of service became big, he had chosen this land where the wild still reigned. Now he was seeing it, conscious that no nature-lover could depict its charms. He felt the stir of worthy impulses, for there was kingship in the association. Of all this he was to be a part; in the midst of such things he was to live. He would know the ways of shadowy forests and winding cañons. The wild things were to be his companions, and the peaks would be to him like brothers.

The meadows and uplands had been taken by a frontier population, and their herds fattened on the mesas. From where he stood Norton could make out many of the whitewashed ranch houses, half hidden in orchards of apple and peach. To these he had come with his message. He had a vision for them—would they receive it? Would they understand? Such were the questions that passed through his mind, and that heaviness which is associated with uncertainty touched him with a momentary shadow.

Slowly he counted the houses as one might number men with whom he had to engage. There were twenty

in the range of his vision. How many more were hidden beyond the heave of the mountains he could not guess. Impulsively he turned to the horse: "Isn't it splendid, Dan, old boy? There's nothing on earth that can match it!"

The horse raised his head from the grass with a flutter of nostrils, rubbing his nose against his master's shoulder affectionately, and acting very much as if he understood. Norton stroked the glossy neck.

"We love it, don't we, old fellow? and it's well we do, for we shall never call any other place home after to-day."

A sigh escaped his lips, for memory was busy. Once he had passed this gate in the hills, the old life would be but a memory to him. He must snap every cord that might draw him back from his high purpose. The faces of friends and old fellowships would be folded away in the place of lost things. Many times Norton had fought this battle, but he found it necessary to renew the struggle, and in the wind-stirred pass he entered into mastery. The vision was triumphant, the call not to be disobeyed! High above, an eagle skimmed the face of the cliff, swept out into the air ocean, and passed from sight in the hazy depths beyond. The omen was good, for Norton had set his purpose to follow into a world as little known to him as the path of the bird.

A letter to the board of his church had been the deciding factor in the whole matter. It came at a time when for weeks he had been troubled with uncertainty as to the future. When he had read it he was conscious of an answer to the call in his own heart. Then had followed weeks of searching of self,

with much testing of motives, all to end in a firmer determination than ever to follow the star wherever it might lead. Some place in the valley below was the writer of that letter; this was all he knew of those to whom he was going.

A coolness had come into the air. Norton recalled himself to find the long day drawing to a close. The shadows were splashing out from the mountain sides like spilled ink, and the wind had changed.

"No, Dan, we are not sorry we came, are we? This is a glorious land, and we shall be happy, I know. But we must be going now, for the twilight will soon be here. Surely, you have had enough to eat. Just see how much bunch-grass you have slaughtered, and, poor me, not a bite since the miner's cabin this morning?"

Replacing the dangling bridle and tightening the cinch, Norton turned for a moment before mounting and looked down the way he had come, while a shadow flitted across his face. For some time he stood with half-closed eyes lifted to the far blue line of hills; then with a strong swing he reached the saddle and turned the horse into the trail. As he entered the fir woods a sense of peace came to him—his Rubicon was crossed. Henceforth he would mingle in strange experiences and live his life in a new and wonderful world. He felt exalted, and with it all came the strength of a master.

Shaking off the melancholy which had oppressed him, Norton turned his attention to the things of nature which banked his way. The trail wound through a dense wood where the rays of the sun never penetrated, and the gloom hovered still and elfin. Be-

yond this he entered a glade covered with a foam of flowers where two red deer started up and watched him wonderingly. Wild bees drowsed to sleep in the closing flowers, and whip-poor-wills began their complaint in the cañon. Dead trees stood here and there like old men, their bald fronts accentuating the greenness about them.

Sometimes the trail wound close under overhanging cliffs with cavernous gloom beneath. High above, a mountain sheep stood outlined against the sky, a sprig of moss hanging at his lip. For a moment the animal remained gazing down into the purple mesh below, then moved with stately stride into the twilight between two gray walls. From remote places came the voices of birds which sing to the moon, as if it were given them to forever rehearse some old sorrow.

Norton rode on—thrilled, delighted! Through aspen glades tinted with mint and fire-pink; under great pines with low-sweeping branches; through banks of mountain cherry, white with bloom; across clear streams fringed with elk moss and cut with the tracks of deer.

At last the trail ran more gently through a widening cañon, past bluffs, and heaps of bowlders brought down in ancient floods, till, turning a point, it slipped through a dense grove of pine and came out at the rim of the valley.

As the wide reaches of fenced pasture lands opened before him Norton drew rein. It was all so new, so wonderful! Every object at which he gazed seemed to possess some mystical personality, clear, yet forever escaping the inspection of the senses.

The night wind came to his nostrils laden with per-

fumes. Flowers he had never seen before were drinking their fill of dew before going to sleep. In the sky clouds were holding cannibal court on the blood of the sunset. An arch of umber spanned the pass through which he had just come. Crickets chirred in the grass and ground-owls complained in the distance. Norton felt it all and sat motionless as one who hears music in a sacred place.

A splash in the stream he had just crossed caused him to turn quickly in the saddle, to see a young woman riding toward him, whose abstraction showed that she had not learned of his presence. The reins had fallen from her hands and lay upon her horse's neck. Her lap was filled with sprays of choke cherry flowers. These she was trying to arrange with a background of piute bells, red as blood. Her hair, of which there seemed to be a great deal, had broken from its fastenings in part and fell a sun-woven tumult over her neck and temples. The grace of a young spruce was in her form. Norton saw that she took the swaying of her horse like something moved by the wind, with feet resting comfortably in stirrups, and her body taking the barrel of the horse easily. Perfectly fitting skirts, arranged for her manner of riding, made her seem the sum of propriety. Aware of his presence at last, she sat up quickly, letting her flowers fall into the water.

"I hope I did not frighten you," he apologized. "I should have spoken, but I was looking at the wonders of this land and had scarcely regained my wits."

A faint smile came to the girl's lips.

"No, you did not frighten me in the least. Perhaps I was a little surprised to see you, that was all."

THE ARRIVAL

The eyes which searched his face were blue as the violets he had seen that day in a cove under the comb of the mountain, and in them burned the fire of a warm nature, pure as sunshine. Only a glance was necessary to note this.

The face at which Norton gazed much longer than he should was framed in haunting beauty, with just a touch of pride. The sprays of hair which had been plucked from their fastenings by the wind framed her forehead with a nimbus of gold, while faint lines of sentiment haunted the corners of her mouth.

If Norton had been pleased with inanimate nature, he was more than interested in this living model of perfect form. From the trim foot, hid in its neat riding boot, to the head crowning the fair column, she was a painter's outline, and there was about her the beat of warm blood—the blood of the Mountain Land.

A glorious forehead, white as ivory, eyes just right, and mouth written with the scripture of woman's nature—creature of education—the wild given heart-beat and sex, was what Norton concluded inwardly.

"I am looking for the home of Mrs. Rogers, a widow, I think. She lives somewhere in this valley. Perhaps you can tell me how to find her place."

His steady glance brought a tinge of carnation to her cheeks. The gauntleted right hand rose with an easy motion, and a gloved finger pointed across the valley.

"She lives at the mouth of that cañon over there; but I will go with you as far as the ford, for if you should miss the crossing you might get into the marshes. It is not far out of my way," she added, as Norton was about to protest.

"You are very kind," he replied, easily. "If I believed in omens, I would take great encouragement in this introduction to the Valley of the Silver Bow."

She smiled faintly. "I think you will find an open door and ready cheer in the Mountain Land, whatever our other faults may be. Whether you stay a week or a year, you will always be welcome—that is, if—if you can come to understand."

He could have told her then why he was there, and why he was glad for her kindness, but something in the smiling half-scorn of her mouth made him unwilling to do so.

"The great ranges have not been high enough to prevent the reputation of the border from reaching the outer world. We have heard of the breaking of bread in the cabins with all strangers, and no questions."

"You are metropolitan, I take it?" She allowed her eyes to touch his with a depreciating glance in which Norton detected a trace of amusement.

"Dare I own it, seeing I have traded places with the country dweller, with his oft-told experience in town? Though I make haste to assure you I have never originated a pun at my farmer brother's expense. Policy would suggest silence till I have learned at least a little of the manners of the land."

"Evasion amounts to confession, though there is nothing serious in a lack of knowledge, providing one is willing to learn."

"I must do that, for I have come to stay," he replied.

She looked at him wonderingly, but did not ask what he saw in her eyes. Inwardly she knew she

would see this man again, and she would learn without asking.

"There is the ford. You can't miss it from here. When you reach the main road, follow it to the cañon. The house is just behind the cottonwoods. I think you will find Mrs. Rogers very agreeable." She drew up, as did Norton.

"For kindness to a stranger I thank you," he said, touching his hat with the ease of the born gentleman. She bowed slightly.

"It is nothing—a mere trifle," she protested, turning her horse with a slight motion of farewell.

Norton rode into the stream and climbed the farther bank, from the top of which he watched the girl galloping along the foot of the mountain; then the twilight shut its opal gates behind her, and she was gone.

CHAPTER II

KINDRED SPIRITS

THE sun-caps lifted from the highest peaks as Norton turned into the branch road which led up to where the Widow Rogers lived. The purple of the cañons had deepened into gloom, and the hollows were full of shadows.

A walk covered with granite sand and fringed with flowers led up to a broad porch from a small gate. The veranda extended around two sides of the house. There were tall colonnades, painted white, which spoke of Southern tastes, caught from old manors. A half dozen steps brought one to the door. Overhead a tangle of creepers made an arch against which the June dusk lay clasping and tender.

Norton walked slowly up the path, drinking the perfume of pansy beds and mignonette. There was a homey atmosphere about it all which seemed to extend a welcome to him. His knock was answered immediately by a kindly-faced woman with graying hair.

"Mrs. Rogers, I believe?" he questioned.

"The same. And your name is—?"

"Norton. I am the answer to your letter."

A smile lighted the pleasant face. "I received your reply," she said, "and you are most welcome. Do come in and rest, for I see you have crossed the range. Pete will put up your horse, and Aunt Betty will have

something to eat in a trice. Well, well, I'm more than glad you came, Mr. Norton, for we need so much what I know you have for us." She drew a chair toward him, begging him to be comfortable. Then she hurried away to assist Betty, the old colored woman, in preparing supper.

Her few words had set Norton fully at ease. The spruce logs blazing in the great fireplace were very welcome, for the nights are always cool in the Mountain Land. From the kitchen came the smell of coffee and frying bacon, whetting even more keenly his already gnawing appetite. It was good to sit in the large room, before the cheerful fire, with the toils of the day behind him. A tall clock ticked on the stairway, while the walls supported many old-fashioned, deep-framed pictures, in which the women wore broad collars of homemade lace, and nets to gather the hair.

There were shelves piled with books, choice and well worn. Norton looked them over caressingly. There were histories and tales of travel, lives of great leaders and poetry, with standard fiction. A piano, mellow with age, stood in the corner, the top lifted and the rest littered with music. The letter had said this was to be his home. It was just to his taste. He bowed his head in deep gratitude. When he looked up again his lashes were wet.

In the cool of the June night Norton sat with his newly made friend on the long porch under the creepers. In the east a crescent of pale light arched the sky. The stars dimmed and died. Then the silver cusp of the moon appeared, flooding the valley with an ocean of pure light. Below, the great meadows

stretched away to the river, which sent its changeful washings on the air. In the ominous mouth of the cañon the night birds were complaining of some old sorrow, while somewhere a stream quarreled with the bowlders in its bed.

"How wonderful it is," said Norton, rising and looking out on the moon-lighted valley. "Peace sleeps in the very heart of it, and all malice and hate seem to have passed away."

"I am so glad you like it. I thought you might feel out of the world here," she replied.

"Not a bit of it! unless I agree that it is a different world from that of greed and selfishness. The change is very grateful to me. I read of it all in boyhood, and planned to come as a trapper and hunter, but not as a missionary. It surpasses all I ever fancied or dreamed. See how those white clouds hover around the peaks—they look like ships at sea, and those cliffs the pearl islands among which they go."

Mrs. Rogers came and stood by him in silence for some time, her eyes lifted to the gray ranges beyond the valley.

"I have looked at all this many times, Mr. Norton, and yet I never tire of it. In fact, I am conscious that the charm is constantly deepening, for there is always some new form or tint combining to greet the eye. Many times I have wished that the world could see it and feel it as I have. That others might hear the voices which speak to me. Truly, it is an enchanted land. But come, we must talk of other things, for even here one can find the trail of the serpent. You would think that people living in the midst of such grandeur and beauty would honor the great Designer,

but not so. Here, as everywhere, the heart is wicked."

Norton knew that she had spoken the truth, though the words were almost as an affront to him.

"It is hard to believe, Mrs. Rogers, yet I know it is true. That is why I am here. But there is comfort in the thought that the mountains have not sinned, and that the cottonwoods and pines have never been in a transgression. Not all the winds with their voices have ever framed an oath. But as you say, man is wrong. He is in rebellion against the good. Tell me about the people of this valley, their ways and manner of thinking." He went back to his seat and turned toward her.

"You have a poet's heart, Mr. Norton. I must say that first. What some never see nor feel has come to you already. I understand! It is the charm of the wilderness. No one has even been able to define it, but it comes—comes to woo the heart, yes, and to win it, so that we can never be happy away from the strange spell. To me, this land never becomes old; it is always fresh and beautiful! See how we are fenced with peaks, white and tall. I have thought of them as tombstones standing at the graves of the centuries. The whole land is caught in a net of streams, they are without number. The woods are full of song and society. Wild creatures roam through them on their secret beats, living their commandments better than we. Here the seasons go by in their colored chariots, all harmony. It is grand, and I love it!"

Norton kindled at her words. Hers was a kindred spirit. The eyes of this woman had been opened and she could see. Her feet had entered the enchanted zone where the selfish and the base can never come.

He would not interrupt her, for he saw that she wished to speak further, and his question could wait.

"But there is more than the inanimate to interest one here"—she pointed into the moonlight where a long line of cliffs ran parallel with the river, their splintered bases hidden by willows and trees which grew between. "In those rocks an ancient race has put its dead since human history began, perhaps. The daughter of a chief is buried in the top of that hill; a willow is all that marks the place. There is a pretty legend told of it by her people which goes to the effect that she was very beautiful and good. She was much loved and sought by the young men of her nation, but it was to the War Eagle that she gave her heart. He, of course, was a mighty hunter, and out of the forest he brought all choice venison and laid it at the door of her lodge. From the streams he caught the rainbow trout for the fair Tonita.

"It was an early day in autumn, when the stags were blue as the laurel, and the air was spicy with ripe wood. War Eagle was anxious to show his love for Tonita, so he took his bow and arrows and went far into the depth of the woods, where he was set upon by a savage beast and killed. Later, his mangled body was brought to the lodge of Tonita, with the beaded moccasins she had made him on his feet.

"The grief of the princess was very great, and she refused to be comforted, but spent her days roaming by the streams. Whole nights she was upon the trails or by the cliffs, silent and gloomy. When questioned by her parents, she replied that upon these lonely rambles she communed with the spirit of her lover, and that she could hear his steps in the pines.

KINDRED SPIRITS

"Once, when she had gone farther than usual from the village, she came upon a wide lake surrounded by high mountains, where there were many snow-white sheep and goats on the cliffs. There she heard the voice of War Eagle calling her from the twilight of the farther shore. Springing to follow the voice, she sank and was drowned.

"The strong swimmers of her people brought up the body, and bore it mournfully to the village in the valley. But the fish in that lake are red, and the tribesmen are wont to say that they are stained with the blood of Tonita's broken heart. They buried her at the top of that hill, and once each year the maidens of her people visit the place with flowers and strange offerings.

"From whence this tribe came is not known. It was so long ago that their own sages have lost the truth about it. Ages before the white man came they were here. They named the valleys and the lakes, and their feet measured the length of all streams. Here they put up their rough altars and worshiped the best they knew. What do you think, Mr. Norton, were those petitions in vain?"

Norton thought for a minute. "The One who made them loved them, and it is according to light, you know."

"So it has seemed to me. I like to think of it that way. And though it may appear foolish to you, I confess that on nights like this I find myself wondering if the spirits of those lovers do not come back to kindle star fires on their fallen altars and to walk with clasped hands under the aspens. Sometimes I picture them shooting their shadowy canoe over the

smooth lake or down the tumbling river. I admit that these things have been comforting fancies on long nights when too lonely to sleep."

"It is a beautiful conception, Mrs. Rogers," he laughed. "Of course, you look at it no more seriously than that?"

"To be sure it is only a fancy. But in such a land one's moods should not be held accountable to law and consistency."

"I agree with you, and shall allow you a complete edition of the poet's license, knowing that without doubt I shall require an extension of the right before I have expressed the feelings which are to come to me here. Tell me how you came to find this land."

"I am glad you have recalled me, for I have wandered away into a region of delightful vagaries not in keeping with the more earnest matters of which we intended to speak.

"I was born in the Southland, where life's best success and interpretation was thought to be cellars of Burgundy, and servants, with ears always open to the bell. There I should have been content to live and die, but my husband was a wanderer—a lover of the wild. The cramped city streets were a prison to him, and fences and lanes an offense to his soul. He longed for the great open, for meadows where no blade had mown, and forests into which the woodman had never gone. His father before him had been a follower of the trail, and the son inherited a double portion of his spirit.

"When I saw he was unhappy I yielded and we set out seeking the ideal spot. From the rim of those eastern hills we looked down into this valley. It was

near the end of June, and nature was at her wonder-working by runnel and river. After he had looked a long time, he turned to me with a great light in his eyes and said, 'This is the place!' and I felt so too; and I have come to love it as much as he did."

"I wish I might have known him!" Norton said, earnestly.

"You would have been great friends, I am sure. It has been very lonely since he left me. His grave is over there under the pines. Of course Aunt Betty has been much company in her way. She had been in the family a long time, and refused to be left behind with her own people. But I miss the one who walked beside me strong and protecting for so many years. You could see his grave if it were daylight." She pointed to where younger trees had sprung up around some long-dead sire, making a small glade.

"But there were some features of the old life I did not leave behind—my books, pictures, and the piano. These I felt I could not part from, and they have been a great comfort to me. I hope they may prove the same to you, for you know this is to be your home as long as you wish."

"I am delighted with it!" Norton said, enthusiastically.

"But we must talk of other things now; I think we have indulged our fancy quite enough for this time. There are earnest matters on hand. You asked me about the people and their ways. A mile below is the Junction. We call it that because the stage road crosses the one running to the mines at that place. The railroad is a hundred miles to the east. Twice

each day the stages go by. This is our only means of communication with the outside world.

"On each side of the river, east and west, are the great cattle ranches, where they cut much hay. The herds are driven to the mesas in the summer time, and to the feeding grounds in the fall. Once each year there is a great beef drive over the trails to the city, two hundred miles away. All have plenty, for our wants are few and the income is a handsome matter. A hundred fat steers each fall is no mean security against need.

"More than this, I can't say, for the love of the good seems to be wanting in a large measure, while fighting and sometimes bloodshed, characterize their gatherings."

"Are they all like that?" he questioned, mentally recalling a fair young rider, graceful as a mountain pine.

"A description of a few will answer for all. There is King Morrison, called that because he is the richest cattleman in the valley. He drove five hundred steers to market last fall. He is a man with much that is good in him, but desperate and dangerous when aroused. Farther up are the Hutch, Hall, and Wilson ranches, and beyond these, the great ranges where the herds roam. Down the valley it is the same. There are ranches and slopes covered with cattle and horses for fifty miles.

"Beyond that tier of hills is another valley like this, running in the same direction. Between the people of the two there is bad blood, with many dark deeds to the score. This is one of the things which my husband regretted more than anything else, and he often

expressed a wish that the valleys might be reconciled."

Norton was silent for a moment. Thought rides in a swift chariot, and a vision is as fast as prophecy. He had swept the years with the glance of a seer, and had given himself a great task. Henceforth there would be a center, an objective point to which he would work—the reconciliation of the rival valleys. If this could be done, it would be worth his while. He would try. But first he must hear more, and learn the history of the feuds. He turned from the half-formed resolution with a question:

"But how about the younger class—is there no chance in that line?"

"There are many young people here without right ideals. Some are wild and untaught, yet not so many of that kind, for it is not a valley of ignorance. In almost every cabin you will find a library, and all the leading ranchmen have sent their children out to college. The ignorance of which I speak is regarding religion. Mary Morrison, the King's daughter, has been given every advantage, and she is thoroughly educated, but her mind is clouded with unbelief, the result of her teaching at college, so I have heard. But she has not been shown the right way, and when she found the things we believe discredited by professors, and some with learning beyond the ordinary, she became confused and seems unable to arrive at the truth."

"Please describe her to me; I—I wish to form some conception of her," Norton requested, hesitatingly.

"That is no easy task, as you will admit when you see her. But when you meet the fairest creature ever born—that is Mary Morrison! Graceful as a young

cedar, and rides elegantly. She is good and pure as she is beautiful, only, she is a doubter. I speak in a moral way. She loves nature passionately, and often spends whole nights on the mountains alone listening to the strange noises about her. Sometimes she goes to the lakes and drifts over them under the stars, while the wolves howl in the forests and the cougars wail from the cañons. She would have been a star in the outside world, and they tried to win her to their social circles, but the hills called her back. If only her heart could be opened to its real needs! She is a bit proud and given to drawing away from what she does not like. But she is clean as snow, and very dear to me."

Norton did not speak. Somehow, it seemed improper that he should tell her that he had already seen the one she had just described to him. One thing he knew: the beauty of the girl had not been exaggerated.

"Has no one ever come to this valley on a mission like mine?" he asked, anxious to change the subject.

"There was one, but he was shamefully mistreated, and driven out, and being a weak man, he feared to return."

Norton's teeth came together with a click. "Do you think they will try something like that on me?" he asked, slowly.

"I hope not, but I cannot say. You are strong, I know, and I take you to be a man of courage. I do hope you can stay!"

"I shall stay," he replied, quietly.

"Let us not talk further to-night. You are very tired, I know, and you need rest." She arose and led the way inside, showing him to his room with a comforting "Good-night."

KINDRED SPIRITS

The window of Norton's room opened toward the road and the meadows. Beyond was the river, with its fringe of trees and pussy-willows. For an hour he sat thinking and enjoying the scene. Somewhere a night bird was singing in a mournful plaint, while the sighing of the wind in the pines made a weird music like the sound of a sad harp.

CHAPTER III

A SURPRISE

"BUT I say it's a fact, he is here! a real live star-loper; a high-heeled sky-boss. Saw him myself as I came over from the Big Willow Ranch. Thought at first it was some kind of a varmint and came mighty near takin' a shot at it, but just figured it out in time."

This statement was greeted with a round of laughter from the dozen riders who had gathered at the Junction store for an afternoon jolly and all-round good time. From the front came the rasping of bits as the horses turned the wheels in the spades.

"Why didn't you rope it?"

"What was the brand?"

"I'll bet a blue steer it never was branded!"

"It ought-a be, and it will before it has been here very long," came from several in the crowd.

"Hey, here comes Scotty Baldwin. Say, Scotty, have you heard the news? Git a good grip on your buck-strap before the thing throws you clean off."

"Heard what, Sprouts?"

"Why, a real cloud-eatin' psalm-singer, without brand or ear-mark, has strayed into the valley. No josh. Johnson saw him as he came over from the Big Willow. I suppose we will have to open the brandin's with prayer now, while Widow Rogers goes along on the organ. Eh, Scotty, how does that strike you?"

A SURPRISE

Baldwin swung out of the saddle with an easy motion, dropped his bridle reins to the ground, and faced the crowd. He was clearly a leader among them, and he moved with the stride of a man sure of his place. Going to the counter, he lifted himself onto it and sat for some moments studying the face of the speaker with a half-amused, half-serious expression. All eyes were turned upon him, and each face wore the look best suited to express the disposition of the man. What would Scotty Baldwin say and do? was the question which was passing through each mind.

All bodies of men must have a leader, and Baldwin had gained his place by those qualities which alone count in the hill country—courage and strength, coupled with dash and intelligence. These things had bound his companions to him as with bands of steel.

Pushing his hat up from his face, he revealed a good forehead, with clean-cut features, touched with reckless piquancy. The dark eyes looked straight at the object upon which they were bent without wavering. His black hair lay in wavy tumult over his head. At his throat fluttered a white handkerchief, fastened in a knot at one side.

Drawing up his foot he began toying with the spur chains at his heel with a gloved finger. His companions looked on and waited, still grinning in an anticipating way. In the Valley of the Silver Bow, Baldwin had become the recognized leader in all matters of importance. On the drive and in the wild fights between the factions of the rival valleys he was hailed as the leading spirit. Through these frays he went smiling, while strong of limb and swift of blow he dealt havoc among his foes.

On the trail none had ever seen him exhausted, and in personal struggles no man had ever brought his shoulders to the ground. Naturally enough he came to flatter himself that it could not be done. Yet his companions had never thoroughly understood him. Usually he preferred to ride alone, and at such times a shadow rested on his face. He had always refused to take part in their excesses, and none cared to go too far in the matter of insisting. One had done this, a stranger, who felt called upon to enforce the code of the Mountain Land, but the lesson he received had satisfied him thoroughly. No one had ever seen him intoxicated, and it was his habit to make peace when he could. Quick of temper, he resented his wrongs with a wild fury, but he had carried his worst enemy for miles when he had found him disabled by the fall of a horse.

"Come, Baldwin, let's have your opinion of this case. Don't seem to be very much interested in the matter. Must have come down by the Morrison ranch. Eh, Scotty?"

Baldwin shot a warning glance at the speaker, who laughed apologetically.

"A real live sky-boss! Will you please repeat that, Johnson, and do it slowly; I want to be sure I hear you correctly," Baldwin began, in a quiet but suggestive tone.

"You've got it straight, Scotty. As Sprouts said, I saw him myself. Got in here some time yesterday from across the hills—according to the Widow Rogers' hired man. Has come to stay, so he says. There you have it, Scotty, and now it's up to you."

A hard look settled on Baldwin's face. "I don't

think it will be very hard to settle this matter," he began, slowly.

"What do you propose, Scotty?"—from Blake.

"Propose? Why, I intend to rope the stray and lead him to the summit, as Old Jed Anderson did the other one, that's all, and it's dead easy."

"Good! Good!" came from all sides, while sly winks passed between the riders.

"But suppose he objects to bein' roped, Scotty, what then?"

"I'll rope him if I start out to, don't forget that," said Baldwin, defiantly.

There were more quiet winks. "But suppose he refuses to lead." Johnson persisted.

"He'll lead if I rope him, and there's no supposing in the case. I know those fellows—raised in parlors among the women, where they learn to sip tea and eat fudge. The whole bunch use perfume, every one of them. I know! They have white hands and look nice all the time. Remember the other fellow? Didn't get to say his little piece once before Old Jed had him by the neck and was trotting along toward the summit with him. Scared! Well, I guess yes. Pale as moonshine and wabbly as a sack. Lost his books and didn't know it. I understand the boys took them to the saloon and put them up for the drinks, but I never sanctioned that part of the play."

"But they might not all be alike. This fellow may pull back a bit. Perhaps you better not tackle the job." Some more winks, while a tinge of color filtered through the tan on Baldwin's cheek.

"Did I ever rope anything that didn't come along, Blake?" he asked, evenly.

"Not that I know of, Scotty. But I reckon every fellow breaks his rope some time, and I was just thinking what a shame it would be for this chap from the sky-range to drop in here and get that twist on you. Of course I don't really think he can, but I was just thinking it would be too bad if he did; wouldn't it, boys?"

Baldwin laughed. "Leave that to me, Blake. You know my rope is paid for."

"What's his name, anyway?" asked another.

"Ask Hunchy, here; he's supposed to know everything."

The storekeeper, a hunchback, slipped from the counter, passed behind the boxes where the Junction mail was kept, and returned a moment later with a letter. Holding the address close to his eyes, he read the name. A ripple of laughter greeted it. "Wayne Norton!" It was poetry itself, all declared.

"No Sam or Bill business about that," put in Blake.

"That would break the jaw of Old Jed himself," from another. So the banter went around.

"Give me that letter," said Baldwin, reaching for it.

"What are you going to do with it, Mr. Baldwin? You know the laws are very strict; yes, yes, very strict."

"O, never mind about the law, Hunchy; we know about that, all right, all right. How about the barrel you keep at the end of your counter contrary to the State requirement? It would look great in the hands of the revenue man, wouldn't it, Hunchy?" The storekeeper grew pale.

"It's all right, Mr. Baldwin, perfectly all right. Just see that he gets it, that's it, see that he gets it."

A SURPRISE

"I'll take it myself, Hunchy. How will that do?" A smile went around as Baldwin put the letter in his pocket.

After that the conversation drifted to other subjects. There had been a raid from over the range and a bunch of beef cattle stolen. Some brands had been obliterated and ear-marks changed. Wilkins, the best rider on the "71," had been thrown by an ordinary cow pony and his saddle kicked off. Charley Painter had roped a wolf, and Tipton had chased a band of antelope till his horse gave out. Plans were discussed for the fall drive, though it was still several months away. This was the great event of the year to the riders. Mounted on their best horses, and trapped out in their finest array, they paraded the streets, bringing all the freedom of the open land to the walled town.

"When are you going to deliver that letter, Baldwin?" called out Johnson, as he swung into the saddle.

"Will go that way this evening. Think I'll have time to take him to the summit before dark."

"Suppose you wouldn't object to a few of us fellows going along just to see the trick it's done by, would you?"

"Not in the least. Come on, for I must make the Big Water Hole before midnight, and that means ride for me."

"Look out for your rope, Baldwin. Remember it's a new one with three months to the drive."

"Leave that to me, Blake, will you?" called back Baldwin, leaning over his saddle and leading the troop at a tearing gallop.

Norton stood on the broad porch watching the

shadows lengthen from the hills and the purple deepening in the cañons. He had been alone under the pines, and a deep peace flooded his mind. The clatter of horses' feet on the road attracted his attention, and a moment later the riders dashed into view.

"Hey, there! Got a letter for you. Just came from the Junction and thought I would bring it up. Come down and get it."

Baldwin drew the envelope from his pocket and held it up. Norton grew cautious. The story of the man who had been dragged from the valley at the end of a rope was fresh in his mind. Nevertheless, he walked quickly toward the horseman. As he did so his eye glimpsed a deft motion by which Baldwin let down his rope. Norton's lips shut tight, though he continued to advance, making some preparation as he did so.

As he drew near the noose shot out with marvelous precision and coiled about his body. But before the slack could be taken up there was a flash of a knife blade and the rope fell from him.

"You must have made a mistake, my friend," Norton said, quietly. "I am ready for my letter now."

"Look out for your rope, Baldwin! Remember, it's three months to the drive," called Blake from behind.

"I'll make you think mistake in just one minute," said Baldwin, swinging to the ground.

"May I ask the reason for your extraordinary conduct, sir?" Norton was smiling.

"Your crime is that you are here, and I am appointed a committee of one to pilot you over the range. See?" Baldwin advanced as he spoke.

"But I just crossed the divide to get here. You

will pardon me if I decline to go. If you do not, I confess I don't see how we are going to agree in this matter." The words were full of colorless levels and aggravating suggestions.

"I'm here to bring you to an agreement. Besides, you have cut my rope; you don't suppose I'm going to let that pass, do you?"

"You should not have taken such a risk with so choice an article. I am very sorry you were so foolish. However, I hardly think you can blame me for not wishing to take the wild horse act in this forced entertainment."

Baldwin smiled confidently as he adjusted a knot in the loop, mounted, spread it, and with the same unerring skill whirled it around Norton's body. At the same instant he drove the spurs deep into the flanks of his horse and the brute sprang with a wild snort into the air, but not soon enough, for there was another flash and the rope was cut as before.

With an oath, Baldwin leaped from the saddle, and striding forward confidently, struck at the smiling face before him, but there was not the usual impact with a wilted body at his feet. A clever sidestep had put Norton well out of the way of a blow that would have felled an ox. Again Norton's lips shut tight, though he continued to smile. Backing slowly, he avoided the blows aimed at him with baffling skill.

From the bunch of riders came Blake's voice in its most aggravating tones: "How does he lead, Scotty? Remember, it's three months to the drive, and that's your first show to get a rope."

"Allow me to suggest, my friend, that you do not crowd in too close. I am not in the habit of walking

backward," Norton warned, as Baldwin sought to take advantage of an opening.

The answer to this was a savage lunge which Norton avoided easily, for he had learned the art of self-defense among the athletes of the "gym" at the old Alma Mater. With rising anger, Baldwin sought to break the guard of the man before him, who seemed even to know his intentions, and who easily avoided his blows or interpreted his feints.

"Stand your ground, give and take, and I'll whip you in a minute," he hissed, red with anger.

Baldwin saw the dark eyes which had been holding his, narrow to slits. There was an easy gathering of the muscles, and, swift as a panther's' lunge, Norton threw his hundred and ninety pounds after his straightening arm which went crashing into Baldwin's neck. Those who saw it were mostly conscious of the sound of the blow and the lift of Baldwin's feet, for he struck on his shoulders.

"If you please, I will take my letter now," said Norton, dryly.

Baldwin was on his feet in a trice, and renewed the fight with anger and admiration mingled in his face. The fall had taught him caution and he brought into play all the points he knew. But it was no use. There was an opening, a blow, and the ranger sprawled a dozen yards away, grasping at the air in an effort to keep his feet.

"I'll take my letter any time, my good fellow," Norton said, smiling in the same maddening way.

Once more Baldwin renewed the fight, but not in the old manner. He had learned that he was no match for his antagonist in the points of boxing, but he

hoped in a dead lock to reestablish his reputation. Closing, he gripped Norton with arms like bent steel. Back and forth they strained, practicing every trip and trick they knew, but never had Baldwin felt such muscles as these, never had such arms been thrown around him.

The veins on the rider's neck grew large as he strained to throw his antagonist, but in vain, for every movement was anticipated and stalled with a bracing foot or a counter trip. Then it ended with a crash, both falling heavily, Baldwin underneath. Norton bored his knee into the ranchman's breast while his hands closed on wrist and throat. Both were breathing hard, for the struggle had taxed them to the utmost.

"Give me my letter!" Norton was smiling again.

"It's in my inside pocket. Just reach in and get it," said Baldwin, his eyes showing his amusement.

Norton drew out the letter, and without moving his position began to read it.

"You will pardon me, I am sure, for I am very anxious to know the contents of this epistle. Doubtless a little rest after such violent exercise will be welcome to you, so just be comfortable while I run through a sheet or two."

Baldwin lay studying his conqueror with genuine admiration and wonder. An appreciation of the ridiculous possessed him. This was the parlor-bred fellow he described at the store; the man with white hands, who attended ladies' tea parties and used perfume. And he had said something about leading him to the summit with a rope! Think of that! Gradually all traces of anger went out of his face and he laughed.

"I am rested up now, and if you don't mind I'll get up."

"Certainly! You will pardon me. My letter was quite interesting." Norton permitted the rider to get to his feet, who turned to his companions, who had burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"He did it on the dead square, boys. I'm simply not man enough for the job, that's all."

"On the dead square, Scotty!" they echoed.

"Every fellow breaks his rope sometimes. Mind what I said to you?" Blake piped.

"It was no accident; I did my best."

"You sure did, Scotty."

"Very well. Tell the boys the straight of it when they ask you, and remember, I admire the genuine thing wherever I find it. This chap is a man, that's all. I struck at his face, but he was good enough to hit me in the neck. The fact is, boys, I was wrong in this whole thing and simply got what was coming to me. It serves me right. I knew I was off as much as I stopped to know anything. But I had a name to keep up, and that's what made a fool of me." Turning to Norton he extended his hand: "Shake!" he said, "and remember, if ever you need me I am at your service, so long as you run on the dead square. You laid me out, but there is no other man in the hills can do it."

Norton grasped the rider's hand warmly. "I shall be pleased to have you for a friend, for a man who fights well can act well if he cares to. You can tell the ranchmen and riders that I have come to stay."

"Can you pray as hard as you can hit?"

Norton laughed. "I can't say as to that. But I'd

"Can you pray as hard as you can hit?"

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like to be something of a guide to as many as I can to help them along the Trail to Better Things!"

"The Guide, the Guide to the Star Country! That sounds good to me. What do you say, boys?"

"It's a go, Scotty, the Guide it is," they echoed, "and now's the time to sign the contract." They circled around Norton with revolvers pointing at the first stars and emptied several chambers. A moment later they had dashed away into the twilight.

CHAPTER IV

A FAIR LISTENER

SCOTTY BALDWIN'S defeat was the principal subject of discussion at all the ranches. Wing-footed Rumor had carried it along the valley, and everywhere surprise and admiration were expressed, for the great strength of the rider and his cool courage had made him a name which was not confined to the Valley of the Silver Bow. That a real "Sky Boss" had mastered him they found it hard to believe. Yet, when questioned about it, Baldwin had frankly admitted that it was true, adding dryly that if any of them doubted it they could find out in the same way he did. He had not been slow to say that the Guide was worthy of the confidence of every man on the trails, and that he was his friend so long as he went on the dead square.

"Don't get it into your heads, fellows, that because he did it any of you have suddenly become competent, for you haven't," he said afterward at the Junction when joked about it.

As a result of all this there was a widespread desire to see the man who had proved more than a match for Scotty Baldwin, and who in the best of humor had read a letter while keeping him down. When it was announced later that Norton would hold his first service at the Big Willow schoolhouse there was a general preparation to attend.

"You will need to lean on the Unseen Arm, for it is not a long cry from the spirit to the flesh," Mrs.

Rogers said as he prepared to go. "You have proved yourself a master in one way; now they will watch to see if you are master of yourself. One little self-sufficiency, one conceited action, and you will have lost all this victory has given you. I know this people, and—and love them, and I do want them to receive the vision you have brought them."

"I have thought of all that, and you may rest assured I will not depend on my own abilities. I know they will come to see what to them is a hero, though I feel anything but that. I shall face curiosity mostly. They will be taking my measure, chest and height, and passing comment on my movements. But I shall do what I can to help them all."

The eyes of the woman filled with tears. "Go on, and remember I shall be holding you up to Him," she said, brokenly.

Norton went to the secret place under the pines and remained for some time. Earlier in the day, Pete had arranged the platform and a desk. The old organ had been thoroughly dusted, and from somewhere a meager supply of song books was brought forth. These were sent over to the schoolhouse. Then followed cleaning and fixing of lamps, old Betty declaring "it done reminded her ob de good ol' color'd doin's down in de Souf." When all was ready Mrs. Rogers withdrew into her room and was not seen again for hours.

Norton rode away through the twilight. The distance to the Big Willow was not great, so there was no need of haste. Buried in his thoughts, he passed along through the June dusk. A sense of loneliness, of isolation, oppressed him. Why, he was asking him-

self, should one man be taken from among his fellows and forced into a misunderstood class with all eyes upon him? Was he not a man? Did he not wish to be as others? Yet this was impossible, for to him it had been given in the great scheme of things to rebuke, to find and paint faults in the lives of others, and to announce consequences. This had been put into the great plan exactly as the crimp of the birch leaves or the perfume of the laurel. It was his portion exactly as the aspen was not the pine.

Of course he could thwart the plan. Plans were upset all about him. There was that dead tree on the ridge. Life had wished to build a living pyramid, but fire had made it impossible. The flowers which the feet of his horse were crushing had been destined for full seed. There was the lesson too. In every case it was best that the plan be followed out. He had no thought of doing otherwise. Yet the necessity of this strange difference between others and himself was not good to his taste.

One thing was sure, he would have nothing professional about him. Though he would be compelled to speak of wickedness in its own terms, nevertheless he would walk among them without cant. He would do a man's part in a man's way. Yet, he knew he would live under a scrutiny which others would escape. To-night they would gaze upon him as something different from the general order, not only because he had defeated their champion, but because he bore them a strange message and a different rule of life. To the candid soul of Wayne Norton this was unpleasant. He would be treated with contempt by some and with a cheap deference by others. He longed to draw close

to the common thought, to make them understand and be understood in turn.

An odor of June flowers lingered in the air. From far away came the weird chant of ground-owls. Over the dusky meadows floated the plaint of whip-poor-wills. It was the hour for meditation, the time when the meaning of life and death draw near.

Norton drank deeply of the mystery through which he was going. Peace again was his. Love and longing were as open books before him, asking him to read from their enchanted pages. The feeling of separation which had weighed him down a minute ago was gone, and a nearness to all things possessed him, a feeling of communion with every other soul.

Loosening the rein, he put Dan into a gallop, and was soon in sight of the Big Willow schoolhouse, with its feeble lights sparked in the windows. Norton's heart beat a little faster as he rode up. Men stood about in groups talking. From these came loud bursts of laughter. Down the different roads echoed the clatter of horses' feet as the late comers dashed up. These were greeted with good-natured banter and epigrammatic reminders of falls from horses, and love experiences in which the riders had known serious unseatings of another nature.

As Norton dismounted and crossed the belt of light flooding outward from the open door, the talking ceased and all eyes were turned upon him. He was just entering the house when a hand touched his arm and turning he found Baldwin beside him.

"How are you, Guide?" he said, cordially. Norton gripped the hand that slid down to his. "It will be all right. I have seen the boys, and every man has prom-

ised to act on the square. But you know this is new business for us fellows, and you will have to put up with our way a little, for we know a lot more about the drive and the trail and the camp fire than we do about a meetinghouse. There's Widow Rogers, and Mary Morrison, and Jenny Mallow, they'll know how to act, for they're acquainted with these things, but we fellows of the saddle are on a new trail to-night, so do the best you can to stand us. I was not born here though, and I knew of better things once, and I reckon a fellow never forgets it. Old King Morrison is from the States, and knew about this way of doing things, though the old man has forgotten most of it, that's sure, so far as his practices are concerned. Yet, he's honest, and has a big heart if you strike him right. If any of the fellows should forget—why, leave that to me. Understand?"

"Thank you," he said earnestly, his voice breaking a little. "You are making it very much easier for me, Mr. Baldwin, and I appreciate it!"

"O that's all right, Guide. You see, I didn't give you just the right welcome to the valley, and I feel a little in your debt. Glad you knocked some sense into me, or, I might say, brought me to my senses, for I knew better. I didn't believe any man could do that, and it did me good to find out my mistake. Anyway, I've lost all desire to rope you for more reasons than one."

Both laughed. "I am glad you have. But remember I am your friend, and I hold nothing against you, though I am sorry I had to cut your rope."

"Don't think of that, Guide, for the score stands

a little in your favor with that thrown in. Here comes Jenny Mallow and Alex Sanders, with the teacher, Miss Dodds. Guess I'll get among the boys before they go in."

Baldwin strode away as the group came up, and Norton heard the chaffing that greeted him.

"It's hats and spurs off and the best foot to the front to-night, so don't get to thinking that you are at a branding corral, boys."

"How's ropin' these days, Scotty?" came back on the instant.

"A little hard on the rope," he replied, in the best of humor.

"Hard on more than the rope, I guess," said Bounds, sitting across his saddle, his knee hooked around the horn.

"Guess that's about right, Bounds. But it's the best we can do on this occasion, you understand, for we are not in the habit of changing a brand or killing a good horse with hard riding, are we?"

"That's so, Scotty. It's the grit that counts in the hills, and we know that when we see it."

As Norton entered and pushed toward the front every eye followed him, and a hush settled over the crowd. The groups outside began to come in, filing off right and left from the door, each one looking for a place as far back as possible. When all had been taken they preferred to stand, leaning against the wall, rather than take a front seat. Curious and out of place, many turned their hats in their hands, while others did not think to take them off till reminded by Baldwin, who tapped his own head in a suggestive way.

Norton sat studying the faces before him. There

were those who had come into the Mountain Land in youth, but most of the younger class had been born there. A few, like Widow Rogers, had lived in the East, and these had brought memories of church life which had not died out altogether, simply because such things cannot die. The call of the wild free life had been insistent, and they had gradually passed from one habit to the other. Now the other thing, the better thing, had come back, and they were secretly glad. Mingling with these were some who looked upon the whole matter as a great joke at which it was perfectly proper for them to laugh. Contrasted with the others were faces full of evil, marked with dark deeds and secret crime.

There was a clatter of horses' feet outside, and a moment later Norton saw the girl who had ridden with him to the ford, enter with a man of dark brows and handsome, scornful face. His neatly curled mustache showed that great pains had been taken with it. A cold, half-curious glance shot from his eyes, as with attractive ease he took a seat beside the girl. For a time his glance searched Norton's face closely, and there was that in it which made the latter feel uneasy. Norton returned the scrutiny with a challenge in his eyes. A large man entered and sat down not far from the girl.

"King Morrison and his daughter," thought Norton. Had not the Widow Rogers told him that the most divine of women was Mary Morrison! He was quite sure he had never seen such haunting beauty of form and face as this woman possessed. Some elf locks had fallen free and lay moist against her face. Her clear beauty contrasted radically with the appearance

of the man beside her His dark glance ranged about the room full of conceit. Norton set him down as a man not to be trusted where his own interests were at stake. It was possible, however, that the fact that he was with the daughter of King Morrison might have made this verdict easy to arrive at. Norton told himself this with a candid smile inwardly.

This was the girl who spent whole nights on the mountains alone. There was no doubt about this, for the lure of the lonely place haunted her personality. In her face was the purity and mystery of moonlight, while the pines seemed to have cast about her their weird spell. If she recognized him it seemed she did not care particularly to acknowledge the fact, for, beyond a slight opening of her eyes, and the faintest possible hint of a smile, there was nothing in her manner to indicate that they had ever met before

In a breathless silence Norton rose and began to speak. He stated briefly the reasons which had brought him to the Valley of the Silver Bow. In all things he purposed to share their lives and to be a part of their world. Already the Mountain Land had touched him with its charm, and his heart had been surrendered to the chaste queen of the wild. He trusted they would receive him with confidence, and as far as possible, count him one of them in every way. These statements were well received. There was no cant, no make believe, so distasteful to men of the open.

The Widow Rogers came to the organ and started a hymn, which only a few helped sing. Soon her spirit blended into the melody, as old memories came upon her, and her voice, rich in volume, breathed out

the feeling which had fallen upon her. All became still but the one singer. A trance-like silence rested upon the listeners, broken only by the deep drawing of breaths which held or flowed as the voice lingered with quivering fondness, or swelled triumphantly over the cherished words. There was in it what they had unconsciously caught in the lark's song or in the wind in the hemlocks.

Norton chose a subject suited to the crude mentality with which he had to deal. In a clear voice he read: "Every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills." This was easy of application, and in a manner, simple. Unbranded herds roamed the hills without an owner. Then there were those properly marked and kept within bounds. He called their attention, also, to the vicious breeds contrasted with those of better strain. With suggestive references he enlarged upon the different brands and ownerships, the clean and the miry drinking-places. At this there were many cross-glances among the riders, for the suggestion brought the Junction barroom into their thought. Carefully Norton turned the figure upon the matters of human life, taking pains that the application should not be too keenly felt. While he was speaking, the face of Mary Morrison wore in turn an amused or wondering expression. The crudeness of the thought was evidently new to her. At the close she went out immediately with Jenny Mallow and her father.

"That was Mary Morrison," the Widow Rogers said as they rode home under the stars. "I think you will agree with me that she is very beautiful; I am sure I did not overdraw the description."

"I don't think you did," Norton said, slowly, his thoughts somewhat mixed. "She has a face like—like—well, it seems to have moon-mist in it, you understand. But who was the man who came with her? I can't say that he impressed me favorably—he has an evil glance, or so it seemed to me."

"That is Richard DuMont. I have never trusted him exactly, though he seems to be very devoted to Mary. Came from the South, I am told, and boasts of old Virginia blood—one of the first families. Met Mary while she was in school and fell in love with her of course. Now he comes here to spend his vacations, as he puts it, each summer. I have thought that the fact that Mary is heir to all King Morrison's property made it easy for him to pay court, though Mary is worthy of love on her own account. He says his family is wealthy, and that he is at the head of important concerns. He makes considerable boast of learning, and seems to want every one to be impressed with his superiority. He has set out to win her, that is very evident, though I hope she does not return his feelings. But I do not know as to that. He is handsome in his way, and very attentive to her. I have always thought, however, that he has not stirred the deeper things of her nature, for she seems indifferent at times. I am free to say that I don't just like him."

Norton might have added that he did not either, but he remained silent. He was thinking, for the woman's words had brought up many different lines to be followed out. He raised his eyes to where a cataract of stars spilled down through a notch in the hills and tried to read an answer to the strange questions which had stirred within him.

CHAPTER V

A FORM IN THE MOONLIGHT

THE wonders of nature as they surrounded him were to Norton an ever-increasing delight. On every hand was mystery—the mystery of life working its harmonies. Far above, the white peaks leaned wanton heads on the breast of the sky, where clouds drifted shiplike across the blue. There was the hurry of white waters, and cool of forest lanes, smelling of mold. Wild timothy and red-topped grass grew in the glades untrampled, save as the elk and deer went through them.

But it was to the ranges that he turned with the greatest delight. The vast uplands retreated from one another in massive heave and shoulder. Down their craggy sides streamed forest beards as from the faces of terribly old men. There were secret little valleys too, where the pine grass carpeted the ground and the wild things made trails from thicket to thicket. There the pines cast great shadows and the smell of the laurel was sweet. Through these he went with slow steps and parted lips.

A few evenings after the first meeting in the Big Willow, Norton rode down to the lower settlements, returning after dark. He had followed the road which ran close to the hills because he wished to smell the mountain pansy and the nard of the young evergreens. It was easy to conjure the song of dancing nymphs

around their forest pools, or fays braiding the moonlight about them on the shallows of the river. When he returned, Mrs. Rogers had seen the light in his face, but she said no word, for she understood.

"I am going for a walk," he said. "I can't say when I'll be back. It seems there is religion in this air, and I want part in the worship."

"It is beautiful!" she agreed. "I think the heart is cultured by such communion. I know you will enjoy it." She watched him till the maze had swallowed him up, then sat down to think.

Norton followed the path which crossed the meadow, with many little turns around banks and clumps of trees. A night wind came up from the west, moving the willows in their sleep. At his approach the frogs ceased to croak and the crickets grew still. He smiled at this silent rebuke, and felt relieved when they renewed their monotony behind him, showing that he had been forgotten immediately. Night birds were calling to each other across the dusk, and a coyote yapped to a shy mate from the mountain side.

Along the valley rose the Burial Cliffs of which Mrs. Rogers had spoken. Norton made his way toward them, for he wished to walk among the graves hidden in the shale and crevices. In a little meadow he startled a doe and fawn which glided wraithlike from him through the aspen shadows.

At the base of the white cliffs he paused. Here, chieftain and sage, warrior and maiden, had been brought for burial through years no one might count. From somewhere the horde had come to this valley in the twilight of unwritten and unremembered times. And they had not known that there were men with

white faces and nerves of steel, who would come and quench their fires and their spirit.

A fringe of chokecherry ran around the wall, the long white fingers of bloom moving wandlike in the moonlight. Deep green currants grew in the isles made by the splitting of the cliffs.

Norton moved on slowly, in deep meditation. Following the line of thought which the place and hour suggested, he began repeopling the wilderness with the lost generations. On the swift river their canoes had glided—had passed and were gone. When the snags on the mountains, dead a hundred years, had been young and tender beginnings of forests, they had hunted in these wilds. By these cliffs they had kindled their sacred fires and worshiped. Here they had chanted their wild songs, or told their crude tales of love under the willows. Over the streams they had consummated their unions with clasped hands—the swart hunter and his bride. From the tops of the peaks had gleamed their signal fires, while in the valley the fighting men had danced the dance of blood.

A large fragment of rock had broken from the main cliff and rolled down to the edge of the meadow. Against this Norton leaned absorbed in thought. How long he had indulged his fancy he did not know, when he was recalled by the clink of metal on stone. At the end of the glade there was a swirl in the moonlight, and a form began to be outlined against the mist. Some one was riding toward him. He peered at the intruder intently. Slowly he made out the shape of a horse and rider, a graceful form—his guide, Mary Morrison! She was abroad on one of her night rambles.

She had not seen him, for her eyes were raised to the white rocks above. Not far from him she paused. He could see that she was lost in thought. How much she was like the beauty about her!—a dream creature in a dream world. Straight at the white face he gazed, with its frame of soft, spraying hair. For several minutes she did not move. The mantle of flesh seemed to have fallen from her, leaving only the chaste spirit revealed. There was no discord in the setting: the moon-glory, the sea of stars, the pale stillness—she was a part of it all, the meaning of it all.

A slight movement had attracted the horse's attention, and her glance was instantly turned in the direction of the pointing ears. "I trust you will pardon my silence, but I was afraid that—I—might frighten you or your horse," Norton began, very much at a loss for words.

"Is that you, Mr.—?"

"Norton," he supplied.

"O, yes, I remember. I assure you I am not frightened. I was not expecting to meet anyone here, certainly, but if you are a dreamer of dreams you could hardly be consistent to go anywhere else. It is impossible to be anything else on such a night."

"That is it—dreaming! I was calling up the spirits of the dead and would doubtless have been holding high revel with them had you not brought me back to the tangible." He laughed to break the strained relations between them. In the moonlight he saw that she was smiling.

"I often come here to call the dead back from the spirit prairies that I may ask them questions and study their strange features and personalities. There is one,

a giant warrior, the hero of a hundred fights and the taker of many scalps; so I have imagined him. He is straight as a pine, with a bold, haughty brow and eyes like an eagle's. I think he must have been a chieftain; he could not have been less, for his glance is like a gathering storm. I would prefer the gentler ones, the maids and the children, but my fancy has this unruly side. Perhaps it is what lingers in me of the savage." She broke off into clear laughter in which Norton joined. "Now you will think me a partner of manes and spooks, I know."

"Not a bit of it. One is excusable for strange fancies on such a night and under such circumstances. That is why I am here."

"Do you love it?" She leaned toward him with a quick intake of breath as she spoke. "I think it is wonderful! There are so many secrets that I would like to know. I wander alone, when sensible people are asleep, asking the winds and the water what they are talking about, and the owls the cause of their grief. The harps of the forest are sweeter than Corney's magic violin, and the sadness of the pines such an old, old grief that I would like to get the secret of it. I creep into glades and watch the deer feeding. Often I have seen the beaver at work chipping the trees; and they call me a dreamer because I do such things. Doubtless, you will think me queer, but the dusk is very dear to me, for it is mostly at this time that these things make themselves felt."

Norton saw that the circumstantial features of their meeting had not impressed her. She was under the spell of the hour. There was a confiding way about her which made him at home after the first time he

spoke to her. Without plan, their natures had blended into the chaste night. The maze held them in its soft folds, touching their spirits with fingers unstained with the rust of flesh.

"It is a time when the hidden meanings of life almost reveal themselves. I have thought, in hours like this, that the white clouds held the secret, or that the stream would find words and speak out. The trees and the wind hold strange conversations, but they never tell what they are talking about. The thing sought seems so near, yet never obtained. I am compelled to fall back on revelation for my answers and rest it there." Norton had spoken in an unrestrained way, and his words were full of the most sincere things of his heart.

She leaned forward, gazing at him intently. Her mood was subdued, and Norton knew that she felt all that had touched his spirit. Surely, the vision he hoped to impart to the people of the valley could find room in a soul so capable of interpreting the wonders of nature and life. For a moment he looked above her in a wordless soul-asking, then he moved away from the rock.

"I think I must be going," he said. "I have spoiled your meditation, I fear. It is unfortunate that I should have come here to-night."

"You must not say that," she protested. "I had only paused for a moment, and would have ridden on directly. I, too, must go. Wild Wind has taken me many miles over the mountains since noon." She rode out onto the meadow and Norton walked beside her with uncovered head.

"I hope you were not discouraged with the meeting

at the Big Willow?" she began, referring to what she knew he would be interested in.

"On the other hand, I was very much encouraged. My little experience with the rider, Mr. Baldwin, has brought an immediate interest. Though I confess I did not enjoy the necessity of it."

"I dare say it seems a long way from the ideal to you, though as you say, the Baldwin affair has set the valley agog with wonder. I confess it was a surprise to—to—all of us."

"I understand you. The elements of a rugged manhood are not supposed to go with one of my calling, but I am glad there are exceptions to that rule. There is something in moral strength, however, where the physical is wanting."

"It is certainly good to have both," she replied, glancing at his tall, strong figure, a note of the pride a woman feels in courage and strength creeping into her voice.

"I shall try and not manifest anything of the professional features of my class. I do not have them naturally, and I shall not cultivate them. I wish to be just a man, with all that means, in every sense of the word."

She smiled down at him somewhat coldly. She had caught the rebuke in his answer, the desire to take from her mind a false impression, and she had recognized his wish as a matter of course. However, what was doubtless life's best meaning to him was to her a thing she felt very little interest in. Perhaps he was right. Men were in the habit of defending their positions, so she had been told. There was a right and a wrong side to everything; and then men were not as

the pines and the cliffs which changed not at all, they were creatures of mood and circumstance, and had the little conceits that belonged to human nature in general. If this man had his, he was welcome to them.

"I will take the trail here," she said, turning aside abruptly, and with scarcely more than an inclination of the head she moved under the aspens, where the trail turned around a great rock, out of sight.

For a moment Norton stood where she left him, unwilling to break the spell which her personality had cast over him. Now that she was gone, he felt as one might who had visited with a spirit creature in some realm of dreams. He tried to recall her as he had seen her a minute ago, for he wished to hold the vision of the divine lips and the pure, intelligent face; to keep the warm glance of the eyes shadowy with womanhood. This hour was his: he had given it to his heart. None should ever know from him of this strange meeting. With this resolve he walked on slowly through the stenciled night indulging that sweet selfishness which breaks no commandment.

CHAPTER VI

THE CABIN IN THE CAÑON

A FEW weeks after coming to the valley Norton learned almost by accident of the cabin in the cañon. There a unique character lived with no companion except a dog. Good fortune had enabled him to drop out of the restless ranks of the gold-hunters, and he had selected this spot for his home, where the shadows of the mighty Bitter Root could wrap him round with their measurelessness.

As soon as he heard of this strange character Norton determined to visit him, and one morning, while the dew was still on the grass, he took the trail up the cañon, and after half an hour of brisk walking came in sight of a blue curl of smoke drifting above the pinetops which told him the cabin was not far ahead.

As he approached a dog rose up with a growl. The sound brought the Miner to the door. He gave his first attention to the dog:

"Steady, Chief; steady there, old boy," he commanded. The dog slunk back, eyeing Norton suspiciously.

"Come in, stranger, come in, and welcome to you." The Miner advanced into full view as he spoke.

Norton saw before him a man somewhat past middle life, raw-boned and lank, with an evidence of an abundance of muscle of the wiry kind. From his

broad shoulders hung a canvas coat, but no vest, and his blue flannel shirt was open at the throat. Every action denoted sinewy strength and activity. There was that about the man which reminded Norton of panthers he had seen gliding about their cages. But it was to his face that one went with a searching glance. The rugged features and deep-set gray eyes denoted honesty and fearlessness. He had a large, firm mouth, with a pleasing expression.

In manner and training he was a son of the trail, delightfully free from cant and hypocrisy. There was a childish candor in his words and ideas. In the free, natural life he had followed there had never been a need to be anything but himself. The land where he had lived was a goodly land, with rushing waters and benevolent springs. The pines had open hands, and the snow fell on everything alike. Every creature went its way as it had been created to do, unashamed. The lesson had been well learned, and in his own conduct and ideas he was a wholesome part of the frankness which had been his environment.

"Mighty glad to see 'e, stranger. Come in."

"That's mutual. My name is Norton, and yours—?"

"Just plain Barns," the Miner replied, gripping Norton's hand and shoving a stool toward him. Norton sat down and tilted back against the side of the cabin.

"I heard you were up here, and I concluded I'd like to get acquainted with you."

"Proper you did, sir; proper you did, sure now, for it does get a little lonesome, though I'm hard and fast for the wild places. Yes, my name's Barns, though the boys used to call me 'Bonny'; but that was after

the fight over on the Black Sand. Let me see—Norton, Norton. I reckon I heard the boys talking about you down at the Junction. Ain't ye the chap that Scotty Baldwin was goin' to rope—eh?"

Norton laughed. "I fear I shall be more noted for my muscle than my virtues," he said, "but it seemed the only way out at the time."

"Of course it was. If ye had laid down like the other chap, the whole valley would a-been agin ye; but as it is, they think ye are made of the right sort of stuff, and they count ye in as a man." There was a strong emphasis on the last word.

"I hope it may work out all right, though I confess I would much rather have kept out of it."

"So ye are the chap that put Scotty on his back! Well, I'm hanged! It takes a good man to do that." The Miner slapped his thigh with a long, bony hand and laughed in his peculiar way. Then he continued in a reminiscent tone: "I never thought much about the things you stand for till Bill died. Since that time I've seen the thing in a leetle different light."

"Who was 'Bill,' and what about the fight on the Black Sand, of which you spoke a minute ago?" Norton saw that, like all of his class, the past lounged about the back door of the man's mind, and that he was on friendly terms with it.

"Who was 'Bill'? Why, him and me was partners in the old days. Spliced kits down on the Uba. Drifted from one camp to another, till the stampede led north, and we got in the lead, for we never calculated that any man lived that could get through a divide ahead of us. When we got into the section where the strike was, we prospected round a bit till

we struck it on the Black Sand. When we stripped off the surface dirt there lay the gold on the bedrock yellow as butter. Made me think of the way my old Mammy used to spread bread for me when I was a boy.

"Now I tell ye, it was mighty fine work shovelin' that pay-streak into the sluices till they was shinin' with it. Frenchie's gang was not far off, so we concluded to watch close, for we heard they was that sort, skulkin' around helpin' themselves out of the boxes. Well, sure enough, one night Bill got up and went to a chink and looked out; then he came back quick and told me to get out, for Frenchie and his gang was in the cut. It wasn't long till I had my boots on, I can tell ye. Bill was a quiet man, and never did no onnecessary talkin', but I heard him breathin' hard and I knew that meant fight. We went down and crept along under the firs till we was right above them, and we could see them workin' like beavers, takin' the sand out of the boxes and puttin' it in sacks.

" 'We had been intendin' to do this cleanin'-up business ourselves,' sez Bill, slidin' down the bank, and I close behind him. About the time we struck the wash in the cut, Bill brought his six-shooter down over the head of old Frenchie, layin' him out on the rocks. I was considerable surprised at this, for I sure thought he intended to shoot. I wasn't so finicky about it, so I cut loose in dead earnest and the fight was on for sure. In a minute it was hand-to-hand business and mighty fast and nasty. Bill was strong as a buffalo and brave as a grizzly, and I never see him put up a finer bit of war than he did that night.

"We was holdin' our own all right, till a rip of fire

split the dark, and Bill staggered back agin' the bank, clutchin' at his breast. Then somethin' snapped inside of me, and I went wild. I felt tall as a pine tree and stout enough to lift the end of a hill. One of the rascals came at me with a shovel, but I took it out of his hands and used it on the gang. Men began to wilt down on the rocks. Then Frenchie tried for me a couple of times, and I felt the hot lead close to my face, but I reached him and squelched him in the sluice.

"There was only three or four left who was able to fight, but they was closin' in, and I was preparin' to give them the best I had, when a bunch of miners from up-creek jumped into the ditch. They had heard the racket and knew what was up, and had come a-bilin' to take a hand. In about a minute every one of the thieves was tied hard and fast. Then I went to Bill and found he was still alive. I was for hangin' the whole kit then and there, but Bill objected: 'Don't do it, pard,' sez he, 'for human blood is harder to get off the hands than red clay.' Well, he made me promise, but the rest of the boys wouldn't, and the next day every one of them thieves was hanging from trees like that many pears—as I've seen them in the old orchard when I was a boy; and they was left till the wind dried them up, as a warnin' to other thieves.

"That was the end of robbin' sluices in that section, but Bill had got his time. We took him to the cabin and done what we could for him, but he died the next mornin' at sunrise. Toward the end he asked the others to go out, and when we was alone he told me to get his pack. When I brought it to him he fished among the clutter and brought out a package wrapped in a piece of flannel shirt. He opened it, and there

was a lot of letters, dirty with sweat, and a little book. Here it is." The Miner went to a shelf and brought a much-worn copy of the four Gospels for Norton's inspection. " 'Open it, pard,' sez Bill, and I did. 'You will find a leaf or two turned down in there somewhere; she made them marks six years ago, when I was leavin' for the mines, and I hain't changed any of them. I ought to read it more, but I knowed it was there, and somehow that helped to keep me straight.' 'Who do you mean by "She," Bill?' sez I. 'My wife, pard,' sez he, sort a proud like. 'She's the best woman on earth!' and his voice broke right there. 'I hain't forgot that she was back there waitin' for me, and there hain't no stain on the vow I made her when she was a girl.' " The Miner paused and looked out on the blue forest and the circling hills with a far-away expression in his eyes. Then he recalled himself with a jerk.

"But that ain't all of it. I just got to thinkin' a bit. Takin' the book in his shaky hands, Bill looked at it sort a tenderlike, and then turned to me: 'I read it sometimes when I was alone, but I ought to had more grit. You can have it for yourn, pard,' he sez, 'and I want you to take my part of the cleanup back to her and see that the debts are all paid, and she is fixed up in good shape; there is a mortgage on the place, and she will need it. Take it yourself; somethin' might happen if you send it—you'll promise me, pard?' Well, I promised, of course." The Miner paused, changed his position by crossing his legs, and went on. "About sunrise he died. 'I'm gettin' close up to the pass, pard,' he sez, holdin' my hand firm as he could. 'There are some good diggin's over there . . .

I have my claim staked, and all the camps are clean. The streams never run riley, and the morning is always on the hills.' Then he was gone. That was a good deal for Bill to say, and it showed that he had a man's heart in him.

"I buried him up on the slope, where the young firs stood about like things that was sorry; but it was lonesome with the bunchgrass growin' between us, so I sold the claim, cleaned up and came here. I've read the book a bit, but it's full of queer things mighty hard for an old beaver like me to understand; but it always makes me feel like hangin' up my guns and takin' another trail; I know now why I never heard Bill swear."

"Did you take the letters back and your partner's half of the dust!" Norton asked, for the Miner had failed to say.

"Yes, I did just as Bill wanted me to, and his part paid the mortgage and a lot more, for there was a pile in the boxes. I seen that everything was fixed up right, met a lot of great folks, and things that made me dizzy. I never knowed that they had such wonderful machines and things out in the world. Pard's widow was the right sort and she thought a lot of Bill." The Miner rose and walked to the door: "Suppose you look my ranch over a bit and see what you think of it. After while we'll have a bite to eat, if you don't draw the line on a miner's cookin'."

"Lead out," Norton commanded in an off-hand way. "This strikes me as a delightful place, and I want to see every foot of it."

Outside he met many evidences of the man's occupation. There were rusty drills in the chinks and on

the window; shovels with the points worn off stood against a large pine; some battered sledges and broken picks were in a pile at one corner, while a long coil of fuse hung like a serpent from a limb. Boxes and long-toms and broken rockers made another heap farther on.

Norton was surprised to find that the cañon widened, farther up, into a little valley of half a dozen acres. This the Miner had fenced, and a young orchard of hardy trees was already on the way. A cow grazed on the meadow near a spring. A ditch brought a rush of white water around the hill to a point where it could be distributed over the field when the hot weather made it necessary.

"There's gold along these streams—not much, but enough to keep a man if he cared to work it. I cleared off a strip of bedrock up there and found the paystreak went about three dollars. That's not very big, but it would pull a fellow along if he got low. But Bill and me never bothered with cheap dirt, and we saved our dust, so I reckon I won't have to work it if I don't want to."

Norton found the way to the Miner's heart an open road, and when they had gone over the little place they sat for a long time under the shadows of the hemlocks as men do when they find each other agreeable. The Miner drew his watch from his pocket, secured to his suspender strap by a buckskin string.

"It's about noon," he said rising. "Let's go down to the cabin and have a feed." He led the way along the trail, talking pleasantly of different things; pausing now and then to explain the virtues of some choice berry or tree he had planted.

Near the corner of the cabin a spring poured from a trough into a keg. The Miner took a bar of soap and went to the spout to wash; then with sleeves rolled up he put a quantity of flour into an out-of-use gold pan, poured in a sufficient amount of sour-dough from a can that had contained syrup, and sprinkled the leaven with soda and salt.

"Might set that Dutch oven on the fire and git some coals on the lid. Take it that you don't mind learnin' the ways of the hills, seein' you are here to stay."

"I want to learn everything along these lines, but you will have to be patient with me and be on hand with instructions, for I'm new at such things."

The Miner laughed good-naturedly. "You'll soon git the hang of it and be up with the best of us," he encouraged.

When the oven was sufficiently heated the spongy mass was put into it with a liberal coating of deer's tallow. Then coals were raked into a small bed at one side. On these the oven was placed with the lid over it, and the bread left to bake. Occasionally the Miner raised the lid with a stick which had a hook at the end, and inspected the loaf. Bacon was sliced and put to fry; its savory smell sharpened Norton's already keen appetite. From a shed the Miner brought a haunch of venison and cut several large slices from the meat. These were put into the bacon grease and fried to a delicious turn. The table was set with tin dishes, and knives and forks with wooden handles. Butter and milk came from a small spring-house near by; the coffee came simmering hot from the fire, and the two fell upon the food with a relish.

"Hope you will come again, if you think you can

stand the fare," the Miner commented, following Norton into the yard when it came time for him to go. "I'm always glad to see your sort, and I'll try to treat you white."

Norton took the big hand which came slowly toward him, and gripped it. "Thank you, Mr. Barns," he said. "I have enjoyed myself very much, and I shall be coming again. Hope you can arrange to be at the Big Willow at some of the services. They'll be right along the line of Bill's book; and meantime, keep the leaf turned down."

The Miner made no reply, but a softer light crept into his eyes and a more mellow expression to his face. When Norton turned at the bend of the trail he was still standing in the cabin door gazing after him.

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CHAPTER VII

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE BIG WILLOW

On the evening of the next appointment at the Big Willow Schoolhouse, Scotty Baldwin rode down the valley on a swift horse. Dashing up to the gate before the Widow Rogers's door, he asked to see the Guide. He was calm, but the dripping horse, white with foam, showed what his haste had been.

"May be trouble at the Big Willow to-night," he began, swinging down and loosening the cinch while the horse drew deep breaths into his expanded lungs. "Thought I'd ride this way and tell you," he added, lifting the saddle so the air could cool the steaming back of his mount.

"What do you mean?" Norton asked, quietly.

"Those fellows across the range are coming over to stampede things, shoot out the lights and take possession generally. Tank Campbell got wind of it when he went over to see his girl—she lives on that side. But they can't do it; no, sir; not if we chaps over here know ourselves, and we think we do! If they try that there will be some lively work going on. I wanted you to know it, so if you want to call off the appointment you can; but if you don't, remember, we will stand by you; that's all."

"What is the cause of this bad blood between the two valleys?" Norton asked.

The rider hesitated: "It dates back. Had its begin-

ning among the old settlers, but the younger bunch have taken it up. I've never got just the straight of it, but it began over stock, I think, in some way. King Morrison could tell you if he would, for he's the leader of it on this side; that is, they hate him the worst, and old Hickland is the chief of the feud over the range. If these old fellows could bury the hatchet it might work out right some time."

"Is it impossible to get these men to drop their differences?" Norton was dreaming again, for the peace of the two valleys had become the great aim of his life.

"Think that is out of the question, Guide. That range there is the line. If a bunch of stock from this valley gets over it they are considered the property of any man who may run them in. There is a bad gang over there—thieves, every one of them—and they make most of the trouble. King Morrison has always refused to do this sort of work, and the Valley of the Silver Bow is not guilty of dishonesty. I believe the better element over there would like to have the trouble wiped out, but the raiders make that impossible."

"I trust the report you bring may prove to be false," said Norton, quietly.

"I wish that for your sake, Guide; but, personally, I owe them a score or two, though I would prefer not to settle up at a church. I think there's something in the rumor, however, for I've seen several of the boys, and they all say the same thing."

Baldwin mounted and leaned on the horn of his saddle, looking down at Norton. On his face he saw the same expression it had worn the day he had under-

taken to lead him out of the valley, and he knew what it meant.

"I've sent word to all the boys on this side and you can count on a bunch of them coming, for we don't stand for anything like this from those fellows over there. Think I'll go up and have the Miner come down, for he's a host when you get him stirred up." Baldwin turned his horse into the trail and disappeared at a lively gait. An hour later, Norton saw him crossing the valley in a long gallop headed toward the Morrison Ranch.

When the Widow Rogers heard of the intended raid she listened very quietly, remarking that it was no new thing. Then she went to her own room and remained a long time, while Norton went out to the secret place under the pines.

There was already a large crowd at the schoolhouse when Norton rode up, and groups of riders were arriving constantly. He noticed that there was a division among them; the factions were not mingling. Strong and sure of himself, Scotty Baldwin moved among the riders of the Silver Bow. He was in his old place as their leader, and they rallied around him fearlessly. As Norton dismounted he heard the sputter of distant pistol shots and the sound of running horses. Baldwin approached him:

"They're here all right, and more coming—hear that shooting? But the Silver Bow fellows have come in from all the ranches, so it won't be a one-sided affair. Perhaps you would like to call off the meeting for this time, till we can get the trouble settled?" The rider searched Norton's face for traces of weakness.

Norton gave him a steady look: "If you men would

rather not get mixed up in it on my account, I advise you to scatter out, but I always hold my service according to announcement."

"Good! Put it there!" Baldwin ejaculated, grasping Norton's hand. "And here's to the last man of us, remember that. Those fellows are not after you so much as they want an excuse to make trouble." Baldwin was delighted with the courage of the Guide. He recognized in him those qualities worthy of respect. "I'll do what I can to head the thing off, but there's considerable drinking going on among them, and you know what that means. But the men of the Silver Bow are sober, for I looked after that. Go ahead, and I'll see if they will listen to reason. I'll take your horse to the guard. We have to do that to keep them from cutting our saddles or stealing our mounts."

Norton found the house well filled when he entered. The men sat silent, their faces indicating their thoughts. The women showed no signs of fear. Norton wondered at this, and why they had come, under the circumstances. It was evident that they were of a different stamp from their more timid sisters who lived where the unexpected never happens—the Mountain Land had birthed children after its own nature. Norton saw also that the men of the Silver Bow were determined that the trouble should start, if there was to be any, with the other faction; after that, they were ready.

He rose and announced a hymn. As the mellow tones of the organ floated out into the folded night, silence fell upon the groups and the loud talking ceased. Then they began coming in, ranging right and left, and filling the seats on opposite sides of the

house. By the time the song was done all were inside who could get in; the rest stood banked in the light before the door.

Norton waited till the disturbance quieted down, and then gave out another song. The Widow Rogers sent him a quick glance as she turned to the instrument. The smell of liquor came to his nostrils, disgustingly acrid. He glanced keenly over the crowd and saw that the harpies were at work. He was certain that there would be trouble.

In the same seat she had occupied the first night, sat Mary Morrison beside Richard DuMont. Norton thought the paleness of her face was accentuated slightly, and that there was a trace of anxiety in the glance she turned toward him. The face of her escort wore the same expression of contempt and impatience with all about him that Norton had seen before. Near them was the giant form of King Morrison, his face set hard. Outside he could see the forms of men, the white at their necks showing clear-cut against the wall of dusk beyond. Scotty Baldwin stood at the rear, his arms folded. Near him towered the Miner, his rugged outline reminding Norton of a dead pine.

In a clear voice Norton delivered his message directly at the hearts of those before him. All had gone well to this point, and he was just congratulating himself that the storm might blow over, when a group of men surged in, uttering a challenge. The men of the Silver Bow leaped toward the door. In an instant all was confusion. Norton saw King Morrison rise and confront the disturbers; saw the swift passes of Scotty Baldwin as that daring rider fought his way to the front like a whirlwind. Out of the din came

the stentorian voice of the Miner ringing a mountain battlecry as he hurled himself into the struggling mass.

Fascinated, Norton stood watching the scene. Curses, blows, and breaking seats filled the place with unearthly din. The fiends of disorder were having holiday; the elemental, coached by practices of lawlessness, was showing its baser side. Norton looked at Mary Morrison. She stood calmly watching her father, who was bearing up against those who opposed him. There was no cry of fear from this daughter of the Mountain Land. She watched the mêlée as she might the battle of two stags in a glade. Her eyes were wide, and flew the banners of courage. A wave of admiration surged through Norton. This was a remarkable young woman, there was no denying that fact.

Jenny Mallow had moved nearer the front, and stood watching the fray with little cries of agony. The mass surged almost against the two women, and Norton went to them. "Come into the stand with the others," he said, touching Mary's arm. She obeyed him without a word, followed by DuMont. The latter sneered his contempt from this place of safety. "I'm able to protect this lady, sir!" he snarled.

"Then why didn't you instead of cowering there till she was all but trampled under foot?" Norton countered with heat.

"Bah! I hold myself above it all. They are cattle—beasts of the jungle. Let them fight. It would not become a gentleman to have part in it. It is no matter of mine."

Norton glanced at Mary. If she had caught the

words she gave no sign, for her eyes were still fixed on the form of her father. Suddenly a quick cry broke from her lips: "O, they will kill him! They will kill him!" she exclaimed, starting forward.

King Morrison was struggling desperately with half a dozen men, who were trying to drag him down. Norton saw and acted quickly. With a bound he was among them. A great strength was upon him, and he hurled the men to the floor as if they had been children. When they rose against him he sent slashing blows into their faces.

A stone hissed through the tense air and crashed against the King's temple. With a groan he sank to the floor. The man who threw it wilted the next instant under a blow dealt him by the Miner. Norton half carried, half dragged the insensible man into the stand, where he made a hasty examination.

"It is not fatal, thank God! Just a flesh wound. He will recover!" Mary had dropped on her knees beside the King, and the words reassured her. She was still calm, and uttered no words of fear or reproach.

Down on the floor the battle went on with relentless fury. Scotty Baldwin fought for the very love of it, his face filled with the light of battle; his clothes torn and his black hair disheveled. His was the courage of one who feels he is in the right. Beside him, the Miner, now thoroughly aroused, fought like a demon. Under his blows men went down as if smitten with paralysis, while his clarion voice rallied his fellows to the fight:

"This is somethin' like it, my hearties! Come on, the whole bilin' of ye. There now, git over that if ye

can. Want some more? Aho! my lads, lay on. Whora-a-a-y for the Silver Bow! Come on there, don't be goin' to sleep. If it's a fight ye want, it's a fight ye'll git! brace up and pay for the music. Whora-a-a-ay for the Silver Bow!"

In an instant Norton was beside the two men, and casting all reserve to the winds he dealt wild havoc about him, for he knew that they were in part doing battle for him and for his religion. The future depended on a complete victory. In the crude code of the hills he knew he would be put down as a coward if he refused to take part in the fight. There was nothing for him but share the mêlée with them, however unpleasant it might be.

Slowly the invaders were beaten back, defeated, outdone. Norton saw the give-way and grasped the opportunity. Springing upon an overturned seat he called for order. His voice rang out vibrant with authority, and the struggling knots gradually fell apart. It had gone bad for the disturbers. Many were on the floor trying to collect their wits, while others skulked from the house as soon as the opportunity was given. Baldwin, Alex Sanders, Big Steve, Burke, Blake, and Johnson all stood ready to renew the fight, their torn clothing and battered appearances showing through what whirlwinds of fray they had passed.

"Let this stop! Go into the yard and submit to reason. The King is seriously hurt, and needs attention—"

Norton paused as the cries of "Good!" "Good!" came from the other side. "He's a thief anyway!" "Too bad it wasn't a little harder! Wish it had fin-

ished him!" came from a man who pushed to the front.

"You're a liar!" broke from Baldwin and Sanders in a breath. Both lunged forward to renew the fight.

The opposing leader raised his hand for attention. "I make this proposition: I'll represent the side from over the range, and you choose a man from this side. The winner is to stand for his crowd, the one defeated for his, and both sides are to agree to accept the issue, whatever it may be. Got the man?" The challenger was of powerful frame and evidently sure of the outcome of his proposition.

Baldwin pushed his sweat-soaked hair out of his face, and stepped to the front. "If I win, we all win—though we've done that already. If you whip me, you are welcome to it. However, it goes; let the defeated side be declared so and let that end the matter. Go and ask your bunch what they think of it."

Both sides poured out, going to different sides of the yard. The Miner towered between them revolver in hand.

"Remember, I'm here to see fair play, and I'll come pretty near doin' it—git me?"

"Don't forget the place where the leaf is turned down in the little book," Norton whispered. The Miner replaced the weapon in its holster.

"I'll do my best for your sake—and—and—the rest, Guide," Baldwin said to Norton in a low tone. "It may mean something to your work, you see?"

"I understand," Norton replied, gripping the rider's hand with both of his.

"They've been trying to get me to meet that chap for a year. They have an idea he is the best man in

the hills. I have always refused because there was no quarrel between us. He is some man, I guess, all right."

"This is a queer way to open up a mission field, but keep a cool head and watch for openings, and I'll not worry about the issue," said Norton, smiling.

Baldwin laughed confidently. The encouragement was good. "I am fighting for peace," he replied, "and I shall do my best. I'd hate like everything to get whipped."

The battle which followed is talked of to this day. It is referred to as "Baldwin's Fight," for, while they had seen him in many frays, never had he displayed such skill and desperate determination as on this occasion. Both men fought for their own reputation and the valley they represented.

After three quarters of an hour of the wildest physical exertion, the opening came, and Baldwin planted a blow which dropped his adversary unconscious to the ground. Baldwin stood over him and called upon the Guide to repeat the terms of the agreement, while the Miner loudly declared that he would pistol any man who interfered.

"He's clean knocked out," said Blake, dropping beside the wilted champion.

"Then it's peace, so far as the Guide and this place is concerned?" Baldwin stood with lifted hand waiting for the answer.

"That's the agreement!" came from the groups.

"Very well, let it rest there. So far as I am personally concerned, you know where to find me any time, but we promise the man who tries to disturb this church something worse than bare hands the next

time; don't forget that," and all knew that the rider made no idle threat.

"Better beat it now before it gits to goin' again," said Barns, adding that there would be lively work if it did. The crowd began to dissolve. A moment later the clatter of horses' feet along the road mingled with the snapping of pistols spitting their red hate into the night. A wild cheer went up from the Silver Bow faction, which was answered by yells and more shots.

Norton hurried to the King and found that he had regained consciousness and was sitting up, though very dizzy.

"Give me your shoulders, you chaps. I must get to my horse and go home. That fellow gave me rather a solid jolt." The iron will of the old man asserted itself, and he struggled to his feet.

Leaning on Norton and Baldwin, he walked to his horse and was assisted into the saddle. Riding on each side they steadied him, and in this manner reached the Morrison Ranch. Mary rode close behind them, inquiring often about her father's comfort. Norton noticed that she said very little to DuMont, who tried hard to draw her into conversation.

Norton waited till he saw the King made comfortable and then turned to go. A gesture from the King detained him:

"You have showed yourself the right sort, and you are welcome at this ranch any time. Drop in," the old man said, warmly.

"I'll come and see you before long," Norton promised, taking the hand the old cattle king offered him.

AT THE BIG WILLOW

Norton turned toward the door again, but this time he was stopped by Mary:

"I wish to thank you both for your assistance. You are men of courage and strength. If it had not been for you, Mr. Norton, they would have killed my father." He saw a faint flush gather under the clear white of her skin, but her eyes were bafflingly full of mysteries.

"If I had not come to the valley none of this would have happened," he replied.

"You must not look at it that way. This is only one of many such try-outs with that gang. They'd have found some other excuse to make trouble. But I hope it will be better from this on, for they were hard handled to-night." The King spoke with a tone of bitterness.

A strange warmth glowed in Norton's breast as he galloped home through the half-night. He found it impossible to regret the disturbance since it had given him the confidence of the King and a compliment from Mary. Earnestly he wished that good would come from it all, and that the old man would share in the benefit.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH THERE IS AN ARGUMENT

NORTON rode slowly on in the direction of the Morrison Ranch. It had been three days since the King was hurt. In that time he had not heard of his condition, and he wished to know. Besides, it was a pleasure to be near the girl whose beauty charmed him in spite of his determination not to be influenced by it.

The morning was fine. It was good to be alive, to feel and love. The hills seemed bending down to bless the valley, and the blue forests invited to their cool mystery. Through an opening in the cottonwoods he caught a glimpse of white water, rushing with a song to the sea.

With a feeling of sadness Norton remembered that though there was so much beauty and harmony on every hand, still, the valley was tainted with evil. It was this that was taking him to see one who had suffered from it. If only he could see this enmity done away and the two valleys reconciled! Could it be done? He did not know. If he judged from appearances, it looked impossible.

Dismounting, he went up the path, bordered with close-cut blue-grass and beds of flowers in bloom. As he drew near the house the strains of an old song came to his ears. Mary was singing. He paused to listen, fearing that he might disturb her if he ap-

proached the door, which was open. The words were not new to him.

"Thou hast wounded the spirit that loved thee,
And cherished thine image for years,
Thou hast taught me at last to forget thee
In secret, in silence and tears."

The song reminded Norton of what he had heard when the winds were praying in the bunchgrass. The strain brought a touch of melancholy, like the asking of night birds.

Norton waited till the last note had died away before he tapped at the door. Mary came to meet him. Her mood seemed very different from the sentiment of her song. Her manner was buoyant and care-free. She received him with a smile of welcome, her eyes looking straight into his with a restful trust, which made Norton feel that he had been admitted to the circle of her confidence. She wore the usual bunch of wild roses at her throat. The expression of her face seemed to Norton like sunshine when it dreams over rare statuary. The white dress she wore set off the strong young form with a cool freshness.

To Norton there was something about this woman which was like the twilight, mixed with the gentleness of rain, yet touched with the fire of the sunset when it burns on a tumbling river. Those eyes, which could find a universe of wonder and delight in the smallest flower, could also flash determination as a gathering storm.

"Come in," she invited. "My father has been asking for you. It is very trying for him to be shut in the house, and you will have to cheer him up a bit.

I tried to sing him into a more pleasant mood, but perhaps my song was too solemn for that."

The King greeted him in a very agreeable manner. "I am glad to see you, very glad, indeed. It is terribly trying for me to remain inside, but Mary insists that I shall not walk out for two whole days yet, and that I can only go as far as the porch under that limit. Be seated, will you? It is hard for one who has always been active to have to sit in a chair stuffed about with pillows. Fine day outside! No weather in the world like that in the Mountain Land."

Norton took the chair which the King indicated. "Glad you are doing so well, Mr. Morrison, and I hope this will be the end of the trouble between the valleys. They were fairly whipped the other night, and they know it."

The King looked worried. "There is no doubt but what they got the worst of it, but as to the other I can't say. We have had a lot of trouble with those fellows. They watch along the top of the range to steal our cattle, running them over whenever they get a chance. That's their method, but not ours. We are not thieves in this valley, so we have had to stand it the best we could. There is a ring over there that ought to be broken up. Some good people in that section, however; they are not all like that. But when it comes to straightening out an old feud, that's different—it takes a long time to purify bad blood." The King spoke with a troubled look on his face.

"But I am afraid that such methods as were used at the Big Willow the other night never really settle anything," Norton said doubtfully.

"That may be true, but I don't know of any other

way to handle them. If we went to law, what could we do? They have their hands on the courts. Besides, they do their work at night, and all stand together, so that it would be almost impossible to prove anything. Looks like we only have the pistol and the club left us."

"I believe I know of a better way, Mr. Morrison, and one that would, if given a chance, straighten out this tangle." The King looked at him curiously.

"What is it?" he asked, after he was silent for some time.

"To forgive as we hope to be forgiven. It is true we have all been wronged, but we have wronged others as well, and that ought to make us very easy on them."

"If one could do so, it would be all right, I guess. But I doubt if I could ever reach anything like that."

"Have you ever wronged a man, Mr. Morrison?" The voice and question were relentless, and the King winced.

"I think there is no doubt of it. No man is right in everything—I don't claim it."

"Would you not be glad to know that the ones you have wronged had forgiven you, and that they felt kindly toward you?"

"Perhaps. I don't know that I had thought of it in that way." The old man grew retrospective, and his unseeing eyes were raised to the fringe of cottonwoods beyond the meadows. The arrow had gone to the center and found it tender, and Norton knew that he was busy with something down the way of memory which it was not pleasant to recall.

The King collected himself and studied the floor before him as he spoke. "We don't hear much talk

like that in this country. It's generally give and take, and the best man gets off with it. That's been my method, though I agree that one never gets to the end of it that way. Thrash a man and you'll have to whip his friends. Kill one of them and they'll shoot you from the trail. Looks like the thing has been getting worse all these years."

"Exactly!" Norton was emphatic. Then, returning to the thing he wished to impress on the old cattleman's mind, he continued: "If it would be pleasant to know that the ones we have wronged had forgiven us, would it not be reasonable to suppose that the ones who have wronged us would be glad to know that we hold no malice toward them?"

"I never figured on it just like that, and if I were sure of it, I don't think it would be so hard to forgive."

"Well, that is my 'better way,' Mr. Morrison, and I am positive this trouble can never be settled in any other manner. I hope it may be solved right, and that peace may come to the valleys." Norton felt the point had been appreciated, and not wishing to overstate it, changed the subject: "It is a great day. I think I never saw nature finer than it is this morning."

"The house is a prison, that's sure. I have been thinking I would get out on the porch, if Mary does not object." The king looked at his daughter with a twinkle in his eyes.

"You must be careful, papa, that is all. I want you to get well—you dear! that is why I am so particular. Mr. Norton can assist you if you require it. Perhaps the morninig air may do you good." She smiled back at him affectionately.

Norton rose and steadied the old man who found

it difficult to walk. With a sigh of relief he settled in a comfortable chair.

"There's nothing like good fresh air to fix one up, especially when he's never known any other doctor." The King breathed deeply of the delicious element. "Now, Mary, you can play for me; I can hear all right out here, and with that and the open, I'll be a well man before night. My head feels easier already."

"If you desire it, father," she replied, going to the piano, while Norton took a seat, which, by the way, was inside and not far from the instrument.

With the eye of a connoisseur Norton took in the arrangement of the room. In everything he saw that cultured taste had dictated the order, from the dainty little cupids in medallion, to the mantle ornaments which boasted among them antiquity with a no less guarantee than the tracings of old Egypt. But that which attracted him most of all was the long shelves of books which occupied one whole side. Among them he saw the masters of prose and poetry. There was his own loved Scott, of all most appropriate in the Mountain Land, with the dreamers from Spenser to Poe.

Seldom had Mary Morrison played as she did that morning. The soul of the instrument seemed to mingle with hers in the pure bridal of harmony. The song was an old plaint of lost love and longing which Norton had never heard. She turned toward him while the last note still echoed in the room.

"I dare say you are wishing I would quit so you can get among the books—am I not right?" Her lips parted in a smile, which revealed rows of white, even teeth.

"I have been looking them over in a half way, I confess. But I am not to be tossed about from one extreme to another so abruptly. Let me say, I greatly enjoyed the song. I have heard that same note in the hemlocks."

"I am glad," she answered quietly. "I only sing for my own amusement, and to entertain father, for there are not very many who enter into the soul of it in the valley. I have formed the habit of crooning to myself in the strain I like best, which I confess is most like the sounds of nature. The drip of the rain and the sighing of the aspens get into one's very make-up, and unconsciously we come to imitate them in our speech and ideas." She had risen and stood before the books, her eyes ranging over them caressingly. Drawing out many of her favorites, she looked at them as one is given to studying the faces of old friends in antique frames. "When the snow is deep on the hills, and the storms sweep the valley, I live in these," she said, closing a volume and turning toward him.

"I will look them over with you," he said, coming to her side.

"There are some authors here you will not admire; possibly, you will be surprised to find them on my shelves, but I like them!" There was a slight tone of forestalling defiance in her words, but Norton did not seem to notice it.

Her finger touched a volume: "You will not like that one, I am sure."

He drew it out. There were many leaves turned, and much marking among the pages. The book was skeptical.

AN ARGUMENT

"Do you agree with the argument of the author?" he asked quietly.

"As much as I do with anything. There are some things I pass on as being only his opinion, and such have only a common value in the market of reason. An opinion, I take it, is something which lacks the facts to make it a certainty."

"There is not much inspiration in it, is there?" he continued.

"It depends on what you mean. I think I never believed in that."

He looked at her searchingly, not without a shade of disappointment in his eyes.

"Do you?" she questioned before he could frame a reply.

"I do!" His voice was decided.

"I had not given these matters much concern till I went to college, and there I found many of the instructors were unbelievers, as you would call them. They exalted the natural, and spent much time on what they were pleased to call the scientific order of things. Nature was expulsive and worked for herself, unacted upon. Evolution explained all. I confess it seemed logical, and it pleased me."

"But the soul—the heart—has questions which nature cannot answer, and these must be met in some other way."

His premise attracted her. "Name some of them, please." There was challenge in her voice.

"I will mention a few: The question of evil and its destiny; the cause of death; the origin of design; love, and from whence it came; the antagonism of evil and good, with the moral responsibility of man. To say

nothing of pain, longing, reason, and a natural tendency to believe. All these are things which nature does not explain. That night under the Burial Cliffs you told me you had asked the water and the winds these things, but they had not answered. I have done the same. The real philosophy is of the heart. I put that before reason. When reason has no answer, the heart prompts to truth. You may call that conscience if you choose." He paused and looked at her, waiting for her to speak.

"Go on," she prompted.

"When we speak of conscience, we get into the realm of morals, and that leads to the inevitable fact of a moral universe. But neither of these can exist without Infinite Goodness behind them. Otherwise, one would be as much an authority on a question of right and wrong as another. With all it claims for itself, science has no answer for any of these questions. It takes to itself the fact and proceeds to manipulate it on its own terms. Beginning with design, it ignores a Designer—I speak of the skeptical, of course. Starting with matter, it arrives at a moral state without bothering about an explanation. Depending on evolution, it brings man up through the animal stages, yet leaves all those types unaltered in the world. Nature is dumb on these points. The trees have no griefs, and they cannot sin. Nature shows us her flowers and spreads her cover of snow. The stars shine patiently on. If I ask them, they make no reply. Our locks and keys, our vaults and officers of the law declare that we recognize man as both fallen and subject to moral law. Every individual believes this of at least all others. The race is corrupted from the perfect

way. Nature has balms for the wounds of the body, but she cannot heal the heart, nor lift the veil from the grave."

He had expected her to show weariness at the subject, but her eyes kindled as he went on, and her manner became animated. Here was foeman worthy of her steel. Her face took on the pure nimbus of reason, in which was blended the ability to meditate on profound subjects. He saw that deep thought was her habit. Her ability to penetrate into subjective things delighted him.

"But are we not a part of nature?" she asked.

"That depends on what limits we set to the word. If we say that the vast All is included in the term, then of course we are. But if we limit its meaning to the bounds of speculative science, then I answer that we are only such in part. I believe the soul lives independent of these material elements. Man has a spiritual nature. Into this the tree and the beast cannot come."

"But do we not act and exist according to fixed law? If so, what avails prayer?"

Norton felt a twinge of pain at her words, while a sense of the gulf between them brought something of heaviness to his mind.

"If that is true, how, then, can I break law? Is not man a transgressor of law? I can place my hand in fire, or take an acid that will kill me. If I can transgress a natural law, may I not transgress moral law? The man who tried to kill your father transgressed both. When you conclude that prayer is useless because of law, is not that making the Creator less than his own creation? There must be a giver of law be-

fore law can exist. When I cast a stone into the air I am setting aside the law of gravity. May not Infinite Power remove one law and introduce another without interfering with harmony? I think so. Now, suppose I call this last law the law of prayer. That will make room for miracles and the intervention of Providence. Do you deny this?"

"Only in so far as nature works out the harmony of her creations."

"Then you admit design without a Designer; law without a Lawgiver; the created without a Creator? But how can there be the first without the second, the second without the first?"

"Professor Duncan went no farther than nature. His view was that from matter came life, and this life, working out the various forms, has fashioned all as we have it."

"But did the professor recognize the fact that there is no life without antecedent life? Did he explain how reason could be the child of matter? or how love could come of such a parent? Did he tell you the reason for death, that destroyer of design? Can reason rest short of Infinite Intelligence? Without Infinite Mind how will it rest from its own flights? To admit this is to solve every problem at a stroke, but to deny it is to cramp the mind into hopeless contradictions and absurdities. How shall we admit human personality and deny antecedent personality? To grant the perfection of the laws of nature and then deny the possibility of their suspension by the One who instituted them, is to make the saddle more than the horse, the plow more than the plowman."

She remained silent, and he continued:

AN ARGUMENT

"Does it not require a greater credulity to believe that blind, unguided force has haply hit upon perfection of form and tint in all cases than to admit the Supreme Being? I think so. Blind force *could not* produce the things of intelligence; such is an impossibility. If reason and design are required to produce the painting of a rose, they are necessary to produce the rose. Shall I say that the greater can be produced by less than is necessary to produce the lesser? If it took a master artist to cut a human form from marble, what was necessary to create the living, immortal man himself?"

"But one has been the work of a month, a year, a term of years; the other the accomplishment of countless ages."

"Is time a factor with any power which can produce a soul? With me, Miss Morrison, it is all very easy. I cannot believe that the horses we ride are the creatures of blind force, while their bridles are the work of intelligent hands. I cannot believe that the fences about our fields were made by reasoning men, while the flowers in our meadows are the things of chance."

"I wish I might see it that way," she said with a little sigh.

"All things being equal, take the most reasonable view. There is design everywhere. Some one has wrought out this wonderful room of nature and filled it with such glorious furniture. I call that Being—God!"

She seemed to be weighing his words as he continued:

"For a minute let us consider the question of evil.

How shall one wash his hands of guilt? Did Macbeth find a way?"

"By ceasing to do the wrong, I should say."

"But to cease to take life does not change the fact that life may have been taken. Can one forgive himself? If there is no Infinite Being there is no right or wrong. The character of God is the only standard of morals. You admit there is such a thing as evil, Miss Morrison?"

"Yes, certainly."

"But only in the hearts of men?"

"True, for the flowers have not sinned nor the birds." Her hands went instinctively to the roses at her throat.

"No, those have not sinned, but the heart under them has," he said, steadily.

She flushed at his words. "Have you found it in me, Mr. Norton, and so soon?" It was evident that his words had hurt her a little.

"Not that. I could admit the very opposite, so far as my experience goes, but there is another authority which declares that we have all sinned. And good and pure as I believe you to be, that takes you in."

She looked at him wonderingly. He was certainly different from the men she had known. His words seemed very frank to her just then.

"And the remedy—?"

"That is the greatest of all. Broken law cries for penalty. Fire burns, cold freezes, excess kills. There is no escape in nature. I must meet my sin, and bear its guilt unless the law be satisfied in some other way. There is One who took the place of every man before the law which man had broken. This is the order of

nature as well. The mother toils for her children and weeps for the one who goes from her arms into the things she had warned him of. The father labors for bread and his children eat it bitter with his sweat. The leaders of reforms give themselves to the measures without regard for their strength. The wild things take up the grass, and the extra thing must die to make room for the number which can live. Vicarious suffering is the law of the universe.

"But how am I to be made clean, even if I am forgiven?"

Her question pleased him very much. "By the terms of the love which suffers for us. The rivers reach the sea heavy with the uncleanness of the land, but they return in snow storms. The green pool by the roadside may become the dew on our roses. So may we become clean by flowing into the great plan of God."

Mary stood watching his face growing more animated as he spoke. Some themes do not require an audience to dignify them, and Norton had gone on, not feeling the need of hearers. The rapt face before him, with its clear, patrician lines, was enough. There was no reply which she cared to make, for by a soul-sense she knew he had spoken the truth, and that truth was at least interesting. There was much in this man she could not understand. There was mastery about him which startled, frightened her. One thing was sure, she could not rate him by the rules she had been in the habit of using in the measurement of other men; the result would not be Wayne Norton.

"I fear I have overstayed my time," he exclaimed, glancing at his watch. He put down the volume and

turned toward the door. As he did so, his glance fell upon a picture of Richard DuMont on the table, and beside it the smiling face of Mary Morrison. There was a great contrast between the dark dash of the man's features and the virgin glory of those beside them. The discovery caused him an uneasy feeling. Bidding the King a brief farewell, Norton mounted and rode away in the direction of the ford, while the old man followed him with half-closed eyes.

"He's a little different from most of men, don't you think, Mary?" But if the girl heard the question she did not reply.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH NORTON HEARS A SECRET

THE King improved rapidly. Norton did not return to see him, being called away to a distant mining camp where a falling trestle had carried half a dozen men to death.

On these trips he went from cabin to cabin, talking with the miners at their firesides or in the tunnels. Sometimes he shouldered through crowded saloons and gambling halls on missions of rescue. In this way many came to recognize the strong form of the Guide, and to respect him. In one place where he was offered some insult, the offending man was promptly tumbled into the street by a miner Norton had nursed through the delirium of mountain fever. From these exhausting journeys Norton returned for rest to the Valley of the Silver Bow.

He had not seen Mary since the day of their argument, but the recovery of the King left her free to ride abroad once more. Once he met her on a wild trail far from the valley, standing in the embracing night, her horse beside her. He had passed on with a few words of greeting.

The days slipped by, filled with June glory. Norton had not been idle. There was that one thing he came to desire more and more—the reconciliation of the two valleys. Next came the determination to invade the section beyond the hills with his message of good-

will. He had turned this over in his mind thoroughly, and the resolve had become fixed. It was not for him to ask questions when it came to following the star of his peculiar destiny, and though there was danger—and he clearly recognized it—still, he could not bar any section from the scope of his duty. There is in all men something of the martyr; a tendency to court danger for principle's sake. If the love of the truth had carried man and maid through the flashing fangs of the arena, he too could walk that exalted path and not be afraid.

Norton observed all possible caution regarding his plans, for he wished his trip to be secret. His date he sent by private means, and he prepared to leave the valley without anyone knowing what he intended to do. This proved to be impossible, for the matter leaked out in one of those ways best known to wing-footed Hearsay. This brought an immediate protest from the King and Baldwin, but to no avail. The Guide had insisted that one of his line dared not recognize boundaries or sections, and that to bar any from the benefit of his message or the scope of his vision was to do violence to both.

The sun hung close to the rim of the western hills as Norton rode up the valley. The trail which he followed led into a forested cañon. Once in the gloom of the gorge it writhed in and out among fallen trees and huge bowlders. Sometimes it spanned grassy hillsides, or crossed flashing streams, fringed with mint. In a glade, the trampled cabbage showed where a bear had banqueted the night before.

At last the trail dipped down toward the forbidden land. Like the Silver Bow, this valley opened through

the great ranges westward. On its meadows a small river wrote strange signatures in a smooth, round hand. Norton rode on, his mind filled with a tumult of thoughts.

In spite of himself they were of Mary. Step by step he went over their argument. Though he had spoken of deep things, they had not wearied her. On the other hand she seemed to enjoy the clash of mental steel.

He thought of their first meeting, when she had spilled her flowers into the water; of the strange hour under the Burial Cliffs, and of that other time when she had stood alone on a far trail listening to the voices in the mystery about her. The thought of her was a delicious flavor in his mind. Into his heart came a vague pain which he had no wish to dispel, though he did not understand it.

Suddenly he drew in his horse and sat straight in the saddle. Throwing out his hand as if to ward off something, he lifted his face to the western sky and laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound. "Not for such as this did I come to the Valley of the Silver Bow; it must end now and forever!" This he told the air and the trees. His iron will had asserted itself. Gathering up the reins, he leaned forward and the next minute he was sweeping down the valley in a long gallop.

A thrill went through him as the lights of the schoolhouse where he was to speak flashed out of the gathering darkness. Men would be there whom he had struck down in the fight at the Big Willow, and these would be anxious to retaliate. However, he rode up boldly and dismounted. A large gathering

of riders and ranchmen were in and about the building. As he passed the different groups, Norton spoke to them kindly, and a few responded with at least a measure of friendliness

Approaching the door, he was surprised to see Richard DuMont draw back into the shadow. It was evident that the man believed he had not been seen. What was this fellow doing there at such a time? A suspicion formed in Norton's mind. It was not that any good might come to him. DuMont was evidently no stranger in that section. The conviction that he was capable of little but villainy was deepened in Norton's estimate of him, and with a clear eye he saw under the pleasing mask which the man wore when it suited him to do so. Such penetration is not generally given to women. They see as through a mist where their fancy is involved.

The schoolhouse was very similar to the one at the Big Willow. For a part of the year it was used for educational purposes, and the rest of the time as a rallying point for the lovers of crude frolic set to rasping bow and tortured string.

The seats, which had been improvised for the occasion, were crowded with ranchmen and their families. As Norton entered, those outside came trooping in, ranging themselves along the side of the room. There was no instrument, and no one to sing, so that was dispensed with. With face raised and voice low, Norton framed a brief petition. At its close all heads were craned toward the door, and a hush fell upon the house, for the frame of King Morrison stood outlined against the background of night, and close beside him Scotty Baldwin and the Miner. They entered

boldly and came to the front. Norton regretted their presence, though he understood their motive and appreciated it. They had believed he would need them, and they had come. At once there was a hostile stir in the crowd, and men began to whisper together in undertone.

Norton stood still, his eyes ranging over the moving figures, till he gained and held their attention. "Let us have order, men. We have had enough of the other thing. Remember the agreement at the Big Willow!" No one moved or spoke for a minute.

Suddenly the Miner rose, stretching his lank form to its full height, looking the crowd over with a clear eye.

"We didn't come for no trouble," he began. "We treated you fellows right till you started the row, didn't we? Well, you treat us the same way till we start one. That's fair, ain't it? I am for standin' by the agreement, if that's what ought to be done. Never was much for startin' a muss, but I don't let no man git farther into one than me when it is started. We come to attend this meetin' and we're sure goin' to do it, if some one has to git bad hurt. But, as I said, we didn't come for trouble, and if there is any, why, you chaps will have to start it, that's all." The Miner took his seat with an easy adjustment of his six feet and a fourth of frame. His speech had contained so many self-evident features of fairness and truth that there was little left for the crowd to do but remain quiet.

Norton gave them his thought in a strong, plain manner. He spoke to them as one man speaks to another when he wishes him well. He did not evade

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needs, but drove straight at the conditions as he understood them. As he read the solemn words commanding forgiveness, the hard lines in the set faces before him mellowed and all listened seriously.

At the close he moved among them, offering his hand right and left, which a few refused to take. With a promise to return, Norton rode away with Baldwin, who knew a shorter trail back to the Silver Bow which reduced the distance by several miles.

Dropping behind, Norton uncovered his head and took the cool of the night. He was overwrought and thirsty, for it had been a strain to speak. As he rode on through the great-chested trees, he listened for the sound of water. At last he came to a stream, and turning aside rode to a tiny pool a few steps from the trail and dismounted. Bending down he drank satisfying draughts of the cold element.

Pausing a moment, his ear caught the sound of footsteps, mingled with low voices. Two men were coming down the path engaged in earnest conversation.

"What's the matter with this, eh? Let's get off the trail and talk it over, for it won't do to get the thing mixed, you understand."

The men paused not far from where Norton stood, listening intently.

"The plan's just the thing. It'll make the old dog shell out to the last dollar. It's perfectly simple."

"But does the other chap guarantee us our pay whether it goes through or not? Don't do any of this sort of business for fun, you know."

"Yes, I saw to that. I'd drop out if he hadn't. He ain't the kind to get things done for love. We have him solid and fast, for if he fails to come to the

scratch we can squeal, you see, and what a devil's mess that would make for him!"

"Looks good to me. Easy money and mighty little risk, is the way I put it. Guess you can count me in. I don't mind making a flush plute come along with a good heave of cash, but you understand my terms: there's to be no dirty work along other lines. You know what I mean. How many are to have a hand in the game?"

"About a dozen, I think. Must have plenty to put it through, you understand. But mum's the word. Things are not in shape yet; when they are, the call will go down the line, and then be ready."

A small evergreen hid Norton from the men. Parting the branches cautiously he studied them by the half-light of the stars. He had never seen them before. If they were at the service he had not noticed them.

"We want to make it go this time. The other haul failed for lack of good planning, but it won't again. When I send you word—move! Till then, adios." The men shook hands and separated, entering the forest in different directions. When they were well gone, Norton dashed ahead and overtook his companions. To them he stated what he had heard.

"Some cowardly scheme, Guide. They are always at it. I know those chaps. You may let them alone, but they won't let you alone. There are men in that valley low enough for any deed."

Norton put in a question to relieve his own mind: "They are not all of that stamp, are they? Surely, there must be good people in that community?"

"True; I am glad to own it. I could name several

families that are of the better order. But there is a ring of thieves over here which keeps everything upset, and this is one of their schemes you overheard."

"Perhaps it might be broken up in some way. What do you think?"

"I'd do my part in any plan with that in view—I hope it may be possible."

Wishing to be alone, Norton dropped to the rear once more. In this manner they went down the great range, while the stars wantoned over them and the night reared about them its embattled walls.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH MR. GUBER GETS ANGRY

"I UNDERSTAND the whole proposition thoroughly; it's a church location he's looking for and here's a roll of bills as big as a beer glass against a washtub that I'm right!" Guber, the saloon keeper at the Junction, brought his fist down on the bar with a savage crash, then he slid to the end of the counter to get a better view of Norton, who, with King Morrison, was inspecting a vacant lot across the street.

"It's a pity they didn't run that chap out of the valley as they did the first one that came in here. A —— lazy loafer, getting his bread easy, and interfering with other men's business. I'd haul on a rope any time if he was at the other end!" The brutal face of the saloonist grew purple with rage, and his eyes protruded more than usual.

A half-dozen loungers sauntered over to the bar, expressing sentiments in harmony with the keeper of the place. This was good policy, for there were times when they must be supplied with liquor on credit. There was one exception to this, however, in the person of bluff, outspoken Tank Campbell, a wild drinker, but a man who possessed that rare quality to judge clearly of his own moral acts.

"Think ye'd like to rope that chap, would you, Gubie? I reckon the best man in the valley tried that little game and got the worst of it, so I'd advise you

to keep your fat out of it, for you'd be like a barrel in a blizzard if that preacher got hold of ye. Look at him! None of your lily-fingered sort: no, sir, he's all man! See them shoulders and the walk of him. Steps like he wanted to carry somethin'. I might as well tell ye, Gubie, that it do surely mean a church over there on that vacant lot, and it would a been a —— sight better for chaps such as me if he'd got here first and kept you out. You needn't go smashin' the bar, for this thing's not over yet, and you may be the chap who will have to haul down his sign. If that time ever comes, Gubie, just count me in, for I'll sure help clean ye out, for that's about what you've done to me. Think I'll just loaf over there and git on the subscription the first man; and I'll pay it, too, 'fore you git your sloppy fingers on it, don't forgit that, Gubie." Campbell strode out of the saloon, and those watching saw Norton grasp his hand and enter into conversation with him.

"If that sniveling hypocrite interferes with my business I'll find a way to rid the valley of him, that's all," growled Guber, dragging the latest paper under his face and going over it with bulging eyes which did not see the print.

"It's a church, all right, all right! and I'm the first man on the subscription. Whoop-a-re! Who'd a thought it! Tank Campbell, the best all-round booze-fighter in the valley, signin' a paper to build a meetin'-house; what do ye know about that?"

Guber glared at the rider savagely: "You'll be singing psalms yet, you shallow-pated gilly, or I don't know gin from jerry," said the saloon keeper, turning to the rest for sanctioning nods and grins. Campbell

raised his broad white hat from his face with a slow movement, revealing a forehead not without its good points; then he walked slowly over to the bar. Reaching a grimy finger across, he tapped the white shirt-front of the saloon keeper several times before speaking, leaving as many spots on the linen.

"Reckon ye might as well keep your comments to yourself, seein' they are not favorable, for I might conclude to throw ye out; understand, Gubie? In case I did somethin' like that you might not be able to tend bar for quite a spell. As for me singin' psalms, it would beat swillin' your sheep-dip any day; and if that notion should take me, why, you old hog jowls, what business would it be of yours—eh?" The soiled finger continued to tap the immaculate shirt front, and the red deepened to a purple in Mr. Guber's face.

"Keep your dirty fingers to yourself," he snarled, trying to remove the spots and making them very much worse.

"O, that's all right, Gubie. This is a place where folks is supposed to git spots on 'em, and you're about the worst streaked of the gang. Better have 'em on your shirt than your good name. But I reckon ye won't go to shootin' if I say they're on both in your case—eh, Gubie?"

The large eyes glared hard at the rider, and the thick lips garbled some words too low to be understood. Tank laughed uproariously, drew down one eye in a derisive manner and continued to express himself:

"Now look a-here, Gubie. It's like two buzzards fightin' each other for being black for you and me to row over our characters. You never had none, and

I lost all mine since I got acquainted with you. You needn't go growlin' over my seemin' remarks, for, outside of the devil, I'd bet my last mustang that a worse rascal than you couldn't be found. Them's my sentiments, Gubie, and I reckon I know ye about right." The rider leaned over the bar and looked the saloon keeper in the eye with something in his glance which warned him not to reply. "Reckon I'll just keep track of this here church business. Allus did say this town needed more houses. That lot over there looks lonesome as a saddle blanket in the road, and it's just the spot for a meetin'house. All you'll have to do, Gubie, is to open the front door and hear the Guide tell the facts about ye. Better come along and put your name on the paper and feel a mite decent for once in your life." Campbell went outside and squelched into a chair. Drawing his hat low to keep out the sunshine, he watched the men across the street with half-closed eyes.

It was true that the Junction was in need of houses. There was the blacksmith shop, standing where the road turned up the slope, the first house on that side of the street. Next to it was the store, kept by the hunchback, and close by, the rough hotel with its dozen rooms, infested with all the colonies which prey upon sleeping humanity. There was a vacant lot between the hotel and the saloon, with a wider space on the other side, before one came to the score of shacks which squatted here and there with scant regard even for the road in their choice of situations.

On the other side was the stage station, where the horses were changed for two routes, one going to Senora, the county seat, and the other to the camps

across the hills. After the station came several vacant lots where Campbell had declared the church should be located. A dozen solitary characters occupied as many shanties behind the main buildings—strange men, such as are met with only in the Mountain Land; who say little of themselves, less of their experiences, and allow no one to ask them questions. Such was the Junction, the one town in the Valley of the Silver Bow for fifty miles above Senora. As Tank Campbell ran a sleepy eye along the shambling street he declared that the church would redeem the whole town, provided it should be dignified with a coat of paint.

"This is the place for it, Mr. Morrison," said Norton, surveying the vacant lots. "Plenty of room for the building, with space at the front and sides for hitching-posts and shade trees. I am sure this can be done!"

"Not a doubt of it; but you will need help in pushing the matter; still, if you have come to stay, and I hope you have, then it must go through. I'll start the matter with five hundred, and if you get stalled come to me and I'll see you get what you need. The ground is mine and I'll give that. Let the others do what they feel like doing, for they'll have more interest in the proposition if they help pay for it."

"Have you started the subscription yet, Mr. Norton? Remember, I shall feel slighted if I am not asked to contribute to this enterprise."

Norton turned as Mary and Richard DuMont rode up. She smiled down at him in the old way. The two men exchanged slight greetings.

"You shall not be overlooked, Miss Morrison, but you have come to be too late to be first, for my friend,

Tank Campbell, heads the list with forty dollars. Were I a believer in signs I would consider this a most favorable circumstance. It is, to say the least, encouraging." Norton saw but gave no heed to the sneer which crossed the lips of DuMont.

"Then I shall be next, though it brings our names together," she replied, laughing.

"The next place has been given to your father, who has gone down for a generous sum."

"It is proper that I come after him," she laughed, signing for a wholesome amount. Then, gathering up the reins, she turned away with a little motion of her hand, which indicated farewell.

"Fairer than Moncrieff herself, or bright Mancini!" Norton thought as the two rode away. When he recalled himself he was conscious that the King had spoken to him without receiving an answer.

"I will see the rest and find what can be done. Hope the building will soon be on the way." Norton spoke as much to collect himself as anything else.

"That will be best. Had an experience a long time ago in this line—that is, I knew of the case. Everybody ought to have a hand in the matter. A one-man meeting house never does well. But in ćase the rest won't help, then I'll put the thing through as far as money is concerned." The two men shook hands and separated.

As Norton passed, Tank Campbell shuffled into the street.

"I reckon the old King did about the right thing in this here business, didn't he?" he asked, as one who felt he had a right to know.

"He came along with a few hundred," Norton

admitted, noting the naturally good face and well-formed head.

"Don't it beat the devil that me, Tank Campbell, would git onto that paper the first of all? Guber, in there"—a jerk of the thumb over his shoulder—"he says I'll be singin' psalms next. What do you think—eh?"

"That you might do worse," Norton replied, dropping his hand to Campbell's shoulder in a confidential way. "You have a good-enough face naturally, Campbell, only you have shot it to pieces with evil-doing. Take out the dissipation and you would be a strong man. Nature blocked out a good body for you, but I think you are at Guber's too much to keep it."

The eyes of the ranger searched Norton's face while he was speaking.

"On the square now, do you think there is any show for a rat like me, Tank Campbell, to straighten up? I've spoiled barrels of poison, and though I've rode straight along for ten years, I hain't got a red put by, and I might a been married to a mighty fine gal, and have a bunch of cattle all my own, if it hadn't been for this hell's nest here. Now, say it again, and say it slow: Do you think there's any chance for a fellow like me?"

There was anxious questioning in the eyes which searched Norton's. The latter grasped Campbell's hand. "There's not a question but you can be a clean man again. But I may as well tell you that you can't do it in your own strength."

"That will do for this time, Guide," the rider answered, turning away abruptly. Going to the hitching-rail he threw the reins over his horse's head, mounted

and dashed away at a tearing gallop. The words Norton had spoken had gone deep, for no one had ever talked to Tank Campbell in that way before.

The services at the Big Willow had come to be a regular thing. A few who had been touched by the words of the Guide, rallied about him in the new undertaking, though there were many who looked upon the matter as something of a joke, which they were not to take too seriously. One thing was true of all: they respected the man who had come to them, not in the ranting garb of professionalism, but with an open palm and a heart-beat in it—the heart-beat of a *man*. In his face they saw the light of a great conviction, and in his voice they heard the ring of a profound earnestness. This man who told them strange things was not lacking in the qualities which they admired. A well-set rider, with a natural dash which was not extravagant; a splendid shot, and a match for their best physical deeds, he went and came among them compelling their admiration.

Often in the secret place Norton had asked largely. At such times the faces of those who hung upon his words came before him, and he asked the greatest good for them all.

Mary Morrison had not gone to the Big Willow often since the day she and Norton debated. When she appeared her patrician face was turned to his with a questioning expression. The one thing needed to glorify it utterly had not come.

Norton went slowly on along the road after leaving Campbell. He was busy with his thoughts. A cloud of dust beyond a fringe of cottonwoods told him that some one was approaching, and a moment later Scotty

Baldwin dashed up, his eyes blazing with superabundant life. Their hands met warmly.

"Saw Mary down the road, and she told me that you were getting a church building on the way; how about it, Guide?"

"It is a fact, and Tank Campbell is the first man on the paper. He signed most of his next month's wages. The King comes next with a nice amount."

Baldwin whistled his surprise. "By the hornspoons, who would have ever dreamed of that. What will the boys say?"

"I am delighted with this unexpected feature of the case. There is hope for Campbell, and once clear of his habits, he will make a good citizen and get ahead."

"But you're going to give the rest of us a chance to get in on this thing, aren't you?" Baldwin pushed his hat from his forehead and sat across his saddle. "Remember, I'm with you, though some of the riders might call it a come-down from following the trail to building a church. Don't suppose I could hit the top of a post with a hammer, but I know how to hold the ribbons with the best of them, and if you need me let me know."

"I'll see the Miner to-day, and get things in shape to begin," Norton went on.

"When is this show to begin, Guide?" Baldwin asked enthusiastically.

"At once. The haying is done, and by the time the fall riding begins we will have the building complete, if all goes well."

"Then adios. I'll round the boys up and report to you what can be done." With a wave of the hand the rider dashed away in the direction of the ford.

Norton took a short cut by a trail which was used only when travelers preferred to shorten the time more than to have good going. Reaching the cabin in the cañon, he laid the matter before the Miner. There were large things in his vision, and this was necessary to their fulfillment.

"And you wanted to know if I would give you a lift, Guide, was that it?"

"Just so, Mr. Barns, if you would."

"Do you think I could handle an ax, eh?" Taking one up, the Miner went to a hemlock which grew near and sank it to the helve in the white pulp. Then by a series of strokes sent the chips in a shower, while he caught his breath each time with a sort of wheeze.

"You'll do!" Norton laughed, as the Miner ceased and turned toward him with a good-natured twinkle in his eyes. "But we are not going to make it of logs, but out of lumber, and it is to be painted—think of that!"

"If that's so, Guide, you can count me in. Bill and me got broke once and we had to put up a few mills to get a grub-stake, so I learned a bit about that sort of thing. Besides, I'd like to put down a little old fifty, and more if you need it. When do you begin?"

"Within two days. Baldwin has gone to see what the riders will do, and I am to meet the King at Widow Rogers's place this afternoon to draw up plans." Mounting, Norton rode away, leaving the Miner looking after him from the cabin door. There was something pathetic in the tall form with its motionless outlines, as Norton turned at the end of the hill and waved his hand.

The King came promptly, and by night the plans

were worked out. There was to be space for teams and trees. The building was to be well heated against the winter days when the thermometer went down to twenty below and the wind wailed over the valley.

The next morning Norton rode to the mill with an order for lumber. The King had told him to go ahead and he knew he would make his word good. That night Baldwin came to report. He had collected the riders at one of the ranches, and in his characteristic way laid the matter before them. He had headed the list himself with a hundred dollars, and the promise of several days' work. This, with the pledges of the other men, amounted to a round thousand.

While all were willing to give of their means, not many were in the notion of helping to build the house. That would be too much of a drop.

Norton sent down to Senora on the morning stage for workmen and stone masons. These arrived on the return coach. Some teamsters started hauling rock from the slides.

With the passing of the days the interest grew. Tank Campbell, wishing to torment his enemy, donned slouch hat and apron and made a great show of taking part in the work, much to the disgust of the carpenters, who deplored his misstrokes, and to Guber, who received a free discourse on the occasion of each visit for a drink. Baldwin and the King came regularly, as did Alex Sanders and Jack Mullens.

"You see, Guide, us fellows are considerably behind in things of this sort; besides, we think you have about what we need and we are willing to help fix a place for the goods."

Baldwin had spoken the sentiment of all who took part and of many others.

CHAPTER XI

BILL'S WIDOW

NORTON had increased the force of carpenters on the church so that in three weeks the building was complete in its shiny coat of paint. The whole matter had been exceedingly irritating to Guber and his friends, who laughed derisively and cursed by turns. Tank Campbell added much to the ill-humor of the saloonist by his speeches and predictions of what would happen to the drinking interests of the Junction as a result of the church's influence.

He had gone regularly to the saloon to report the progress of the undertaking. On the completion of the foundation he took a drink. When the heavier timbers were all in place, he emptied a bumper. The driving of the last nail in the floor was an occasion for several drinks and a speech to Guber. So with each step of progress he appeared at the saloon to report, because it made the eyes of the owner of the place bulge with anger and his face grow a deeper red.

"What the —— is that over there, Guber—take whisky, please—anyway?" asked a rider from down the valley, whirling around at the bar with the untasted liquor in his hand. "Tain't a livery stable, nor a dance hall, nor a brandin' corral—what the devil is it, anyway?"

Guber breathed hard. The church was his daily

aggravation. The words of the rider set him fuming with rage.

"That thing? Humph! It's plain enough what it is, you lobster. That's a church!"

"Who's at the lead of this here drive, anyway?" the other went on.

"Why, that —— lazy cheat of a preacher. He's got to have a place to dish up his superstition, you see. Wish I had him at the end of a rope—I'd church him!"

"Why don't you run him out and set fire to his shack? that's the way to treat them kind?" There was pace-setting in the words, and the cowboy pushed up his hat with an air of cheap abandon, showing two smears of sweaty hair brought low over each eye.

"Did I hear some one talkin' about settin' fire to somethin' hereabouts?" Tank Campbell asked, coming in just in time to catch that part of the conversation. "It may be a seemin' remark and proper to say that if there's any fire-settin' in this here community, there'll be a dirty joint that looks about like this that'll burn sooner than its owner, onless he croaks soon. It might be all right fer ye to make a note of that, Gubie —take whisky straight—no, don't want a chaser. Put it on the books, please. I signed my next month's wages on that church paper." Campbell slouched at the bar waiting for the glass which the saloonist filled unwillingly.

"It's on me—the house. Come on, the last son-of-a-toad of ye! Any time Tank Campbell jines church that's the time to be generous. My credit's good, so here's to ye all in the name of the meetin'house. Line

up, ye pizen-spoilin' cubs of the drive." The men obeyed with alacrity, the glasses making a lingering clatter on the bar as they went down from the quaffing lips.

The down-valley rider sauntered over to Campbell's end of the bar: "See here, Tank, this is the way it stacks up to us fellows lookin' on. You ought to take us over the grounds and show us the inside workin's of that institution over there. That goes with bein' a deacon, you know."

"I'm your man, Pony, so come along and don't be spoilin' atmosphere with words." Tank surged out of the door, leaving Guber sweeping up the fragments of a broken glass, and swearing with vexation.

"If that ain't Scotty Baldwin up there then I don't know a cow from a horse or a brand from a dew-waddle!" said Pony in genuine attonishment. "And there's Alex Sanders, and Blake, and King Morrison —well, by the nine gods!"

"Hello, Pony!" called Baldwin. "You have come a little late to be of much service, but you might sweep out the sawdust and the short stuff. We want to get in the seats to-morrow, and there's plenty up here for the rest of us to do till then."

"An' you think you can dare me, don't you, Scotty? You long, lank forker of bronchs. I'll jest call your little bluff right here and now—dig up the broom!" Pony threw aside his coat, vest, and handkerchief, and stood glaring at Baldwin, who sent Tank for a broom, and that worthy improved the occasion by helping himself to Guber's new one from behind the bar.

"Three shots for Pony!" called Sanders, as the rider sent the loose material flying toward the door.

Half an hour later the rider paused. His hands were blistered and he was very red of face.

"Six shots for Pony!" Sanders shouted as the last stick went whirling through the door.

"None of that, Sanders!" Pony retorted. "I ain't jined no church; no, sir; and you needn't be shootin' up things for me. I don't take a dare, that's all. But if any of you horse-and-cattle thieves tell this on me, so the boys git hold of it, you git your boxes ready, for you die—git me? You die, as sure as I ride for the Lazy H outfit."

"Better look out for Guber, Pony. He's mad because you swept the church with his broom," Sanders went on.

"To —— with Guber! If he squeals I'll cut him the thirty I owe him and swear he's lied, besides givin' him the worst thrashin' he ever had in his life." Pony strode to the bar and gave the saloonist his instructions and was soon in possession of a promise which the account on the books made it easy to give.

The building was completed the next day. With a short time for the drying of the paint it would be ready for service. Norton looked it over with great satisfaction. Out of that center he hoped would go influences which would make his dream of the peace of the valleys a reality, though, when he thought it over, it seemed a thing impossible of accomplishment. To the men who had helped him he spoke a few earnest words, with a handclasp which told them all he felt in gratitude of heart.

It was about this time that the valley was stirred by an event of unusual interest because of the parties in the case.

With a quiet curiosity, Norton had seen the Miner following the trail to the Junction each day for a week. He had thought nothing of the matter at first, but when the maneuver was repeated so often he spoke of the matter to Mrs. Rogers, who had no explanation forthcoming. These appearances were made at stage time, and the Miner wore his best suit of clothes, a black fit which the people of the valley had seen but once, when he returned from the East, after settling up matters with Bill's widow.

One evening, after the stage had passed, the household at the Widow Rogers's place was thrown into excitement by the appearance of the Miner in company with a kindly-faced woman some ten years his junior.

"Caught you nappin' this time for sure—eh, Guide?" laughed Barns, slapping Norton on the shoulder till his teeth chattered.

"Well, it does look that way for sure, old man. Come in and explain yourself, you sly old fox. What have you been up to, anyway?"

"You and Mrs. Rogers come along up and git acquainted with Bill's widow, and that'll be about all the explanation ye need, I take it." The two women clasped hands—the word had united them.

"You recollect, Guide, I told you I took Bill's half of the clean-up back to her—well, I've made another clean-up—that's all." The Miner broke into unusual laughter for him.

"And to think you would set me aside in this matter and get some other chap to fix things up for you!" Norton pretended his chagrin.

"Things ain't gone quite that far yet, Guide, and you jest put it down right here that no other man

looks after them things but you. That other chap down Senora way would like to show up on this proposition, all right, but not him. He's a good feller, far's I know, but I stays by my friends, and that's you, Guide. You're the man I want to say them words before."

"Farley is a good fellow, and he shines at weddings, but I don't want him coming up here marrying my folks, you understand." Norton's eyes twinkled as he bantered the point with the Miner. "How soon is this thing to happen, Barns?" he went on in an undertone.

"Don't be askin' too many questions, Guide, right first off. It ain't my way to waste time on anything, and that's about the fact in this case. But this is new business for me, and I reckon you'll have to help me out a bit, for women ain't the sort of croppin's that has usually come under my glass, though I'd bet a clean-up bigger'n a hornet's nest that this one is the genuine, free-from-dross, twenty-ounce kind." Here Bill's widow sent the Miner a glance which warned him that he was overdrawing her merits. The Miner changed positions, collected himself and rattled on:

"You see, it's this way, Guide. Me and Bill was pards of the right sort. I liked him, and he liked me. When he was dyin' he wanted me to look after his interests, as I told ye before—and I did. But when that was all 'tended to I thought I'd look after my own a bit, and that's why I am here under these circumstances.

"I saw that Bill had made a mighty good selection, but I didn't tell her so—not me! I knowed enough to keep still, for no man like me could expect to take

his place till the sore spot had a little time to heal. So I rolled back to the hills and did the assessment work on Bill's claims, and that made it necessary for me to write to his widow now and then, though I ain't shinin' as a writer. I was mighty glad of this, for I didn't want to lose track of her, you see.

"Well, I thought four years was enough of this; besides, when I was back the last time I saw that if I didn't do a little talkin' somebody else would. But I didn't have the sand to open up the claim, for I didn't know how, and I was afraid I'd spoil the whole thing, so I came back and fixed up a letter makin' it as plain as I could, though it took me two weeks to git it to suit me. Well, sir, she seemed to see the thing about as I did, so I thought she might as well come along and we'd try the trail together, and here she is. I reckon ye can find a place for her for a week or so till I git fixed up at the cabin, can't ye, Mrs. Rogers?"

"Most gladly, and as long as she wants to stay. We are delighted that your friend has come to be one of us, and we hope she will like the Mountain Land, though it may seem a little wild at first."

"She will certainly git on with both of ye, for she picks and shovels in such things as ye started over at the Big Willow."

"That is some more good news, and I may as well tell you that Mr. Barns has been quite faithful in his attendance, and has helped us in every way to bring the church to completion."

"I am glad to hear that," said the woman, looking at the Miner with eyes in which there was confidence. With a woman's intuition she had read the rugged

soul of the man, and she was not mistaken. When he had scrawled an awkward letter asking to hear from her she had overlooked the mistakes, and answered him. Later, when he offered her a place in his life, she was not afraid to commit herself to him, and she was never sorry.

"Why didn't you tell me this was on hand, and I would not have asked you to help on the church?" Norton rebuked genially.

"Fill up that shaft, Guide, for it's all right. It won't take long to throw up the other rooms. I've got the logs all ready, and they're handy, so don't stand there lookin' like you had been robbin' sluice boxes. Do you know, Guide, this is a great strike for me? I never knowed the love of woman till now, and it's better than findin' gold in a pocket. But I can't understand why she'd have anything to do with me. I'm only a rough old prospector, and never had nothin' to do with fine folks, but she has. There was lots of meetin' and doin's back there, and the folks all seemed to look up to her. And she wasn't ashamed of me, though I was strange to it all, and like a bobcat in a trap. She'd take me right up to them fine feathers and say: 'This is Mr. Barns, my husband's old pard,' and things like that, and the first I'd know I'd be talkin' away, and tellin' them stories about the West, and close shaves I'd been in.

"I had serious doubts whether she'd have anything to do with me or not, but I sez, sez I, 'it's a prospectin' trip anyway, and here goes on the indications,' and, sir, I struck the richest lead of my life. I reckon I've dug more prospects in these hills than there are badger holes, and I've never had no chance to slick up, but

I've always tried to do the square thing as far as I understood it, and that's what I plan on in this case."

Norton studied the honest face, letting his glance sink deep into the clear eyes, in which he saw a half-hungry, half-wondering expression. To this man had not come that earth-wide fault, a double manner. Into his simple life there had never come the need of being anything but just himself—frank, open, honest; kind as the forests and clear as his own white streams.

The one friend who had entered his life with affection and understanding was the partner of whom he ever spoke with emotion and gratitude. Here was a heart which had never been eaten with the deadly rust of vanity or deceit; nor had its streams been polluted by trifling. With an impulsive movement, Norton took the large, rugged hand in his, pressing it with a grip of steel—the two women had retired to another part of the house.

"I know why she likes you, Barns—for the same reason I do—because you are a great-hearted, clean fellow, with a soul like the hemlocks where the sunshine is spilling through them—there you have it straight."

Something like a mist came into the eyes of the Miner. "I hope ye are right, Guide, for I've always wanted to live so that a needy prospector might strike it in me—bein' the right sort of a lead, and I sure plan to treat her jest right, for she's worthy, don't you think?"

"She is one in a thousand, Barns, and I know you will treat her square."

"One thing more, Guide. I want it to happen at the cabin. I plan to straighten out the rough places

in the trail, and fix things up a bit. Do you suppose the fellows will come up there? I want to give them a feed."

"Not a doubt of it, for nothing could keep them away. The grove back of the cabin will be tied full of horses, and everything will go as you want it."

"Thank'ee, Guide, thank'ee. I knowed you would help me through where the fine manners comes in." The Miner strode out and took the trail up the cañon. Norton walked with him to the back gate and stood watching the lank figure swinging away, with a spring in his stride which was good to see.

CHAPTER XII

IN WHICH THERE IS A MATING

THE Miner had entered a new world. Till now he had lived the flesh life, eating when hungry and drinking when dry, searching among the rocks for treasure which he did not need, and with no plan for its use.

Now his soul had found its meaning in the earth sense—a union with another soul. The minerals are useless till fused. The gases combine into ledge-rending power. The sunshine is a white frost till splashed against the world; then, warmth and answering life. The soul of the Miner had flashed to its own world, and that was the heart of a woman. The seeds of sentiment which had lain dormant in his rugged nature were breaking into clean flower.

That which had quickened the stride of the old Miner, sending him up the trail with a new light in his face, was the thing that has thrilled the breasts of poets in all ages. It is this which makes love all love, and divine.

The chain of the slave has grown light when beside him walked the dusky creature who inspired him to sing and forget. The songs of the mating time are for the same reason; so are the trysts of dainty does and beamed lords in the moonlit glades. That shall be a master book which shall contain all woman has done to keep the glance of the world lifted and its heart exalted.

With such thoughts as these Norton watched till the tall figure was lost in a belt of woods, then he turned to his own room with a sigh, for a face drifted into his vision, as a snowflake falls through the branches of the hemlock—falls and melts to nothing.

Norton, Baldwin, and others assisted in the enlarging of the Miner's cabin, and in a short time three ample rooms had been added. Then the trunks were brought up and the contents arranged in the best way to make the cabin look homey. White curtains were dropped at the windows. Pictures were placed upon the walls, and some rugs gave the floor tone. A bewildering number of books, which the Miner declared he would read if he smashed his thinking machine, were placed on the shelves.

The Widow Rogers, with Jack Mullens's wife and Mary, helped get things in order. Norton had not been present when Mary was there, but his quick glance noted the perfect taste of the rooms, and he understood who was responsible. Once they met on the trail as she came down the cañon, but she greeted him in the old reserved way and seemed half lost in dreams.

To the surprise of all, the Miner had ordered a good supply of furniture. He had not gone about with closed eyes while away, and mentally he had listed what he would get if the woman agreed to come to his cabin. There were two stoves, several rocking chairs, and a large box of utensils for the kitchen, with other minutiæ which astonished those who saw them. These things came in on a freight wagon from the outside in good season, and were adjusted with the rest.

When all was arranged and there was no one about

but Norton, the Miner broke out in his characteristic way: "This is tunnelin' on a new level, Guide. Usually, we go down for the pitch, but this time I have started on top of the hill. Why, think of it! Curtains at the windows, and stoves and a clock, with them things—what do you call 'em?—on the floor."

"Rugs," Norton reminded.

"That's it, 'rugs.' I reckon they are as common to you as a gold pan is to me, but I tell ye they are mighty strange in this cañon. Why, jest look at that house, Guide—linen and white things, with bought towels and rockin' chairs. See them white spreads and them books—enough of 'em to crack the thinker of anybody. It looks like the angels had shed here, for sure. It's all too good for me. Reckon I'll be goin' out and havin' a camp fire now and then, with a fryin' pan full of bacon, just for the sake of old times. But she's worthy of a lot better'n this, and I want you to help me blast out the stopes a bit so I can give her a square deal."

"I'll keep my eye on you, Barns," said Norton, laughing. "But there is a better reason for cleaning the claim than this, though a good woman makes a splendid start."

The Miner looked at him understandingly. "You are the first Sky Boss I've ever met with, and I'm a little off on the croppin's as you represent 'em. I know horn silver and free-millin', but this is a new belt for me—I never been on it before."

"You will try to learn?" Norton asked earnestly.

"I'll try, Guide, for I have a notion there is good ground in that range."

There was joy in Norton's heart as he went down

the cañon, for it seemed to him the first glint of the morning was at hand.

The day of the wedding arrived. It had been preceded by several of preparation, in which the new stove at the cabin had been dedicated by the best art of Mary Morrison and Jenny Mallow, who were assisted by the Widow Rogers.

Norton had seen to it that all received invitations, and there was a hearty response. Riders came from all the ranches, and the cañon rattled as they surged up the trail. Women came, young and old, attracted by the novelty of a wedding, which, though as common as plowing a field, has never lost its power to interest, and Norton's prophecy was fulfilled, for the grove behind the cabin was tied full of horses.

Jenny Mallow arrived with Mary and DuMont. Something that was more than repulsion stirred in Norton as he saw DuMont assist Mary to the ground, an attention which she permitted though she did not need it. Norton turned and strode away. He had read this man at a glance, but he knew her eyes were holden. Possibly there had been moments of mistrust, for the truths of the soul are inevitable, and he remembered the silent smiles that night when the King was hurt.

Norton was ill at ease as he strode away through the gathering darkness.

He walked on slowly. Somewhere a bird was sending its weird song through the dusk, and the air throbbed with the monotony of insects.

He threw himself down on the moist earth and lay watching the upper worlds dancing about like lanterns of monks. He wondered what the meaning of it all

might be—the burning of heart and the cosmic sadness of nature. Life promised much and he longed for its ultimate good. But there was fever and unrest within him. Just then the chain of his calling seemed a heavy one. He felt keenly the separation which it demanded. Why should it be so?

A spray of piute flower touched his cheek. "It is the passion flower," he mused. Then he smiled. What had he to do with such symbols of the heart? He put his face in his hands; it was hot, and his eyes burned fearfully.

Suddenly he sat up and lifted his eyes to the stars. Their rays touched him, but what distance lay between. Was the night so much and yet nothing? Could he not ask it the questions which revelation and intuition had seen fit to pass by? Why did not the life which surged about him take lips and speak? Ah, the very hosts of heaven would listen if it did. But did they not know? Norton felt they must. Why did self ask of self? Could mystery marvel at mystery? He put out his hand and touched a branch of a tree; the balance was broken, and he watched it resist the contradiction and come slowly back to center. Here was his evidence. There was a universe within him as well as without.

He turned his glance inward; saw the red scripture of his heart and tried to make out its meaning. There were the grouped stars of Longing, Memory, and Regret, with the high sun of reason shining in his strength. As he gazed there came a pale cloud of disorder, which broke into beautiful mist, took shape in lines faint as the form of a spirit, then a face like the syringa flower, set in gold-spun hair. One glance

and he broke into laughter which had no mirth in it, leaped to his feet and started down the glade in the direction of the cabin.

At the door Norton met the Miner. "I'll ask the boys in, Guide. I reckon they feel about as I do. It's mighty new business for the lot of us." Going from group to group the Miner delivered himself in his characteristic way: "Come in, fellers; don't be loafin' out here. If anybody is goin' to git scared around these diggin's it's me. Come in, the last bilin' of ye, and look sociable, for I don't know whether I'm Barns or the spook of Loco Ike. But I plan to make as clean a showin' as possible, and I hope it'll pan out right. Bill was a white man if there ever was one, and the Guide would tell ye that he crossed the divide with good float in his pack. I promised to look after his interests, and I did, as well as my own. So that's how it all happened, but remember this is a lot harder on me than the rest of ye—I reckon ye'll understand that?"

This speech put every one at ease, and the riders responded with a cheer which startled the elk at the head of the cañon and set the coyotes yapping beyond the bluff.

When the shuffling crowd had been disposed of around the rooms, where the more timid stood turning their hats nervously, Norton asked the Miner if all was in readiness and was told that it was "time to light the fuse."

In a few well-chosen words the prospector and Bill's widow were made one. The man entered into the contract with proper earnestness, and there were tears on the lashes of the woman. Evidently Barns

understood the responsibility of the union, and the light in his face was good. Those who looked upon him saw him as the peaks among which he had lived—rugged, wind-cut, and seamed, but with the veins of gold running through his nature. Next came the boisterous handshaking, after which the long tables were uncovered, heaped with delicious viands.

"The eatin' business is in the hands of the women, I reckon, so we'll jest git out of the way and give 'em plenty of room for the sluicing!" said the Miner, as his wife slipped into the kitchen with the others. "These riders is ready for it too, I wager, for there's appetite in the very air in this country. None of your nibble-a-cracker business, but plenty of bacon and beans, washed down with coffee and seasoned with venison steaks."

Norton found himself seated across from DuMont, with Jenny Mallow for a waitress. He glanced down the line and saw Baldwin taking something from the hand of Mary Morrison. DuMont also looked that way and his glance darkened. His manner showed that he was greatly bored. Norton felt a little irritated at this.

A remark from Norton in an effort to be sociable brought an abrupt rejoinder: "Hope you will be able to civilize this breed, for they need it. Watch them gulp. Bah! It will be good to get back to culture and real life."

"I thought you were here from choice, and possibly in love—with the Mountain Land, like the rest of us," Norton replied quietly.

DuMont's glance rested upon Norton's face keenly for a moment. "Did you?" he replied curtly.

"Let me assure you of it. I hardly see how I could think otherwise under the circumstances. I shall be at a loss to understand why you spend so much of your time in this valley and the one over the range, after what you have just said." The shot went to center, and the man started, fixing a searching glance on Norton's face. This was only for an instant; the next the sneer returned.

That night Mary Morrison was at her best. Cultured and kind, she succeeded in that most difficult task of all: getting a bashful man to eat all he wants. Norton saw the eyes of DuMont following the girl with a light in them it was not hard to understand.

He noted also that Mary gave a full measure of her time to Scotty Baldwin, and he was glad. Did he wish this? Yes. That would be better than to have her crushed by the man across the table. Anything would be better than that. But why was DuMont so ill at ease if he had fully won the heart of this girl? One thing was sure, the man who was to know that good fortune would have no reason for such unrest.

At every meeting with Mary Morrison, Norton found some new thing to interest him. How pretty she looked in the gown which showed the easy play of the strong young body. It was while she was passing something that Norton noticed that she wore a ring which indicated that her promise had been given. But if the bit of metal indicated all it should, whence this feverish fear of the man to whom the promise had been made? There was something about it he could not understand.

After supper Norton spoke for all present. They wished the Miner well on his new claim, and that when

the last great cleanup should be made, he might, with his last partner, find the boxes full of gold, with a clear trail over the Great Divide.

In the open space before the cabin the riders drew up, and at a word from Baldwin a hundred pistol shots crashed away into the cliffs. Then they were gone.

Norton remained for an hour talking to the Miner and his wife, after which he mounted and rode down the cañon alone.

CHAPTER XIII

A PASSENGER OUT

THE summer days went by, and again the first tints of autumn were seen in the forest. Here and there a gold or crimson leaf came fluttering to the ground, the first of myriads to follow. Nature stood still and held her sweet breath.

Norton had improved the time, knowing that in a little while the passes would be deep with snow. Distant camps and lonely cabins came to know him. At one time he would lift up his voice against ragged wickedness in the street; again he would sit the night out with some delirious miner, picked from the breakers of excess, or caught in the fiery net of a mountain fever. Gradually the rough men with whom he associated came to figure him into their lives. When there was an accident, and men hung swooning at the verge of eternity, they would send for him, prompted by that instinct which forces the mind to take note of things out of time. And he would always go, standing by them in their crude sorrow, or speaking the last words over some companion who had slipped from the trail, while the hemlocks sighed above them, and the pines cast wide, kind shadows on the grave.

He had not neglected the rival valley in his plans. Often he went to that section with messages which he sowed on the soil of their natures against a hoped-for harvest. He had been warned not to appear there

again, but believing it was the work of the ring, he had disregarded the matter. Yet he knew that the old breach was still unhealed, and as wide as ever. How the matter was to be worked out he did not know.

One morning when he came down from his room the Widow Rogers greeted him with the information that Mary Morrison was planning to leave the valley for the winter. Norton felt a cramp of heart which he mastered quickly, permitting his face to give no sign.

"The winter—that's so, it will soon be here, won't it?" He looked out dreamily across the wide meadows to where the aspen groves were bright in their togas of gold.

"She is going away to complete some branches of study, among which is music, though she is unusually accomplished in that now. I hear that this time next fall she is to become the wife of Richard DuMont. I am told that they are to go abroad on their honeymoon. I confess, the thought of it is very distasteful to me. They say he comes of a good Southern family, but I have always felt uneasy about it. Mary is so gentle and good, I wonder that he attracts her."

Norton's eyes were on the yellow banks across the meadow, in his face a calm resignation. Mrs. Rogers continued: "The marriage is to take place in time for them to leave the hills before the heavy snow. They are to spend the winter in Paris, I think, and then tour the other countries, returning here by the close of the summer."

"How did you learn this?" Norton asked.

"Mary told me a little and Jack Mullen's wife the rest. Mary said nothing about the trip abroad, and

only stated that the wedding would perhaps take place about the time I have mentioned. She didn't seem to want to talk about it. I had been speaking of her ring, and she looked up with a little sigh, telling me that it only stood for half bondage, and I thought she put a strange accent on the last word. I am sure the King don't like him, but he wants Mary to have whatever she sets her heart on. The old man worships her, for she has done nobly by him since her mother died."

"When were you talking to her about this matter?" Norton's voice was the same colorless tone.

"It was since the Miner's wedding. She was here one day and I thought she appeared down-hearted, so I tried to cheer her up by referring to this subject. But I saw that it increased her discontent, so we talked of the bonfires that would soon be kindled in the forest, and I found that she had been spending whole nights alone on the trails. Her heart was in that and she grew happier as we went on."

"When did she first meet this man?" Norton asked, indifferently.

"Two years ago while she was at school. It was at some social function to which Mary was invited, and parties with tendencies of the match-making order, arranged the affair. Since then he has kept in touch with her, spending his summers in the valleys. He never wants for money and seems to take life easy. I am told he has large property interests in the camps over the range, and I suppose he goes to them now and then, for he leaves the valley sometimes for days. I fear Mary does not know her own mind, for I understand she does not permit him any of the little privi-

leges of a lover, but holds him off in a laughing, don't-care way, which drives him mad and makes him insanely jealous of every one that looks at her."

Norton made no reply, but stood gazing straight ahead for some minutes, seeing nothing. What did it matter to him if Mary Morrison did leave the valley? This was not his mission to the Silver Bow. Somewhere a door closed in his soul, and the white face was on the outside. He told himself that he cared most because the light which had never kissed peak or lake had not come to her face. He was sure she would find nothing in the world she was entering that would help her to it. Without a word he went out into the yellow sunshine and on into the depths of the forest.

He walked slowly, lost in thought. Coming to a small stream he followed it. Doubtless it rose in some fay-haunted pool. Trees stood about him like great brothers, big-chested and kind. He told himself that it would be splendid to watch the moon rise over such a spot.

An hour slipped by. Norton had penetrated far into the bizarre woods. He was vaguely conscious of having stepped over the stream many times. Turning an angle he paused suddenly, for seated on a fragment of stone was Mary Morrison.

He would have slipped away without disturbing her had she not seen him as he was drawing back. She did not move, but he saw the smile which came to her lips. A light wind stirred a maple and a shower of leaves fell over her. One larger than the others remained upon her hair, coronating her. He crossed the stream and came to where she sat.

"What is it that brings us together at such unexpected times and places?" he began, looking down at her.

"You haven't forgotten the Burial Cliffs and—the moon, I see."

"How could I? That was a night of enchantment."

"I think you must have been vexed to have me break in on your meditation."

"On the other hand, I felt that I had intruded on private grounds, for I knew you were in the habit of visiting the spot, and somehow we hate to have our secret altars profaned."

"No, no, not that, but you—I spoiled your dream."

"The facts are, you completed it. Nature needs a soul, you know. You may remember that we talked of this once."

"Yes."

"Shall I have reason to think I have done the same thing in the present case?" he countered, the trace of a smile on his lips.

She colored a little. "No, you have not intruded. You see, one expects anything in such a surrounding. I would not be startled at a meeting with Pan himself." Her eyes were full of shadows as she studied him.

"What a magical thing the forest is at this season." She was looking from him again at the leaping colors about them. "What rhythm to everything! See all this vast bleeding without wound or pain. The red wideness of it, the measureless gold, the ocean purple, bewilder me. I feel a mere heart-beat in an immensity of life." She had risen and stood with her hands clasped.

"It is like a thousand fires burning away the witchery of the spring."

"I love it all!" she said, almost in a whisper, more to herself than to him. "My own dear land, my Mountain Land; there is no other place where my heart can rest." She looked about with something of farewell in her eyes.

"I understand your feelings, Miss Morrison; for though I have been here so short a time I feel I could live nowhere else."

"It is like parting from old friends to leave it."

"You are going out, Miss Morrison?"

"You knew it, then?"

"Mrs. Rogers spoke of it to-day."

"It is only for the winter. I have some postgraduate work to do which will keep me away till the flowers come again. I was taking a farewell ride to-day, getting a baptism of beauty to remember it by, when I am choking on the spume of city streets. I think I know how the eagles in the parks feel, caged with bars." She recalled herself abruptly, looking around. "I do not see my horse. He has strayed off somewhere. I must find him, for there are other places I want to visit to-day." She moved up the hill, Norton walking beside her.

"That freakish thing which brings us together at such places will permit another minute, I am sure," he apologized, laughing.

"My horse is quite gone!" she evaded, looking about. "He has become restless and left me; I shall have to follow his tracks."

Together they went down the aisles of the enchanted wood. From the rim of a glade they watched deer

browsing in the laurel. At last the horse was overtaken and received a well-earned scolding from his mistress.

"You will be going soon?" he asked, half indifferently.

"Within a week."

He reflected a moment: "I shall be at one of the camps over the range then and shall not see you." He ceased and waited for her to pass on.

"I wish you great success, and that you may not find your task with this people an impossible one."

"I have an ambition—it is to unite the two valleys in peace. Do you think it can be done?"

She looked at him wonderingly. "I fear not. There is much you do not know. It would be splendid if you could."

"I will part those vines so you can pass." He stepped forward, lifted the swaying ropes and held them apart, making a tinted arch under which she paused an instant.

"You will cheer my father what you can, won't you? It will be lonesome for him when the snow shuts the land in. There are my books—rummage among them as much as you wish. Good-by." She leaned down and gave him her hand; then without looking at him again she rode away, and was lost among the clustering pines.

The next morning Norton took the trail with his face to the northwest. By noon he reached the summit, and began dropping down into the vast region beyond. Night found him in a miner's hut, his horse feeding in a glade at the end of a rope.

Early the next morning he was on his way, and by

noon rode into the sprinkle of cabins scarring the hillside like incongruities. Two days later he was on his return by way of a small camp to which all things were taken on the backs of horses or men.

The first night of the return he spent by a trapper's fire, sharing his mountain hospitality. From this camp he rode away through the crisp October morning. The more lofty peaks were already tipped with snow, for the winter begins early in the Mountain Land. The streams were choked with leaves, and the wolves boomed across the wilderness. It was the time of feeding for winter fat, and they were bold. Pairs of them trailed Norton through the forest uttering their gathering call—the call of the pack.

Mary had finished her preparations and was ready to leave the valley. Baldwin had galloped down to "see her off," and found her waiting at the Junction. After a warm farewell to the King, Mary shook hands with the riders and the stage rolled away.

"I shall get very lonely for you and the valley, father," she had whispered. "But when the flowers come again they will bring me. Till then, I shall be hungry for my Mountain Land. We shall have one more summer together before—" she had not finished, for a look of pain overspread the old man's face.

Norton reached the divide where the stage road crosses to the big world beyond. As he turned westward down the grade he saw the stage rounding the hill. He kept to the edge of the road to let it pass. His hand had dropped in an easy manner to his hip, and with the strong moving of his horse he made a striking picture.

He was greeted by a voice he had come to know for

its strange sweetness. Mary Morrison was leaning from the stage door, her eyes bright and her cheeks glowing. At her request the driver stopped.

"I leave my father in your charge, Mr. Norton. Don't let him get too lonesome while I am away. When the flowers come again I will return; till then, good-by!"

He had just time to promise her when the stage moved on. A moment later her hand appeared and she waved him farewell. The next instant the coach passed from sight.

Norton turned Dan into the road and hurried on his way. A dozen miles lay between him and home. As he came down the range he unconsciously calculated the time till the snow would be gone and the flowers appear. Then he shook off the thought, laughed a little, and dropped the magic veil of resolution between himself and the stage and all it bore.

"I have a disgust for that fellow," DuMont began after they had passed. "Men of real sense do not have to take up such a profession for a livelihood. Bah! They are mendicants and hypocrites, every one of them. It will be good not to hear his cant for a few months at least."

The eyes of the girl darkened. "There is room for a difference of opinion on such points," she said, quietly. "Mr. Norton is, without doubt, a true gentleman, and worthy of being the friend of anyone. Did he not look grand as he came up?" A glimmer of mischief came into her eyes.

"Posing, that's all! Posing! Seems the whole matter might have been arranged and the setting chosen."

"That is possible," Mary admitted, enjoying DuMont's choler.

"D—n him!" he hissed. "It takes a stretch of imagination to transform this mendicant into anything chivalrous." In his anger DuMont had gone too far; the look in Mary's eyes told him that.

"Mr. Norton has always been too much of a gentleman to swear in my presence," she replied, coldly.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Morrison, a thousand pardons. Silly habit, I know. I shall not transgress again." She had insisted that he call her by her last name, another strange feature of their relationship. DuMont became condescending in the extreme. He talked of nature—a theme he knew she loved—and hiding his own feelings, tried to take from her mind the disgust his words had created. However, Mary permitted him to talk with scant replies, till he returned abruptly to the former subject:

"Bah! Miss Morrison, you must not notice my untimely speech—a slip of the tongue, merely. Doubtless such men are a necessity to some people; and if they want them, they should have them, though it seems to me that such a profession calls for very little courage and not much of the more rugged elements which are the charm of strong men. There now, I must stop or I will be saying something to hurt your feelings again." DuMont broke off with a forced laugh.

"I am not in full agreement with his views—that is, I think I am not; but when it comes to the rest, I beg to differ with you. His conduct since coming to the valley stamps him as a man possessing all that strong men need to make them such. I think many who

crossed arms with him at the Big Willow could bear witness that he is able to make his mark in more ways than one. You were present on that occasion and know I speak the truth."

"A dog's mêlée, and no place for a gentleman. I would not have part in such a bruiser's bout—gouge eyes, bite and drink blood. A clean cartel and a show at art and I'm with you, but brute force to brutes, say I."

"You evidently forget my father had part in that contest, and that he would have been killed had not this man you malign gone to his rescue. I resent your words, sir, as unworthy of a gentleman, which I think you claim to be. We will say no more." Mary's words had been a surprise to herself, for she had not felt an obligation to defend Norton; yet she had done so without planning it. Both lapsed into silence and talked little the rest of the way.

At the station she bade DuMont a rather cool farewell, consenting to write him as she might find opportunity. Then she took her seat in the car, and with tear-dimmed eyes watched the loved peaks fade out of the sky.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN HEARTS GREW SOFT

THE fires of autumn died in the forest. The aspens stood naked and full of moaning. With a blast of bugles winter swept the Mountain Land, hiding the earth under measureless white. The wild herds came swarming to the foothills where the greasewood and bunch-grass stood thick in the hollows. At night the wolves howled in the cold, blue woods. The idle time of the riders had come. The horses stood in their stalls, and the herds milled over the feeding grounds.

The church at the Junction became a rallying point for the snowbound ranchmen and rangers. There they gathered when the games and worn-out amusements of the bunkhouses became intolerable. The secret place under the pines was heaped with drifts, and Norton was compelled to go to his room, where he spent hours in silent struggle.

There had been a kindly acceptance of his message, but he wished for that abandonment to truth which is a death of self. He longed for the dropping of scales, the loosening of tongues, and the melting of hearts. Surely, the time had come. The passes were choked with drifts, and he could not visit the other camps. Because of this he could give his entire attention to the Silver Bow.

The announcement that he would hold a service each evening for some time was received with satisfaction by the men, and they led out their horses and

dashed away, glad to be abroad. Norton was at his best.

The gatherings were large from the first. Along the roads came troops of riders, their horses' feet throwing up clouds of the white fluff. The first night there was a surprise in store for all of them, for who should walk in but old Jed Anderson. This was his first appearance at church, and there was much passing of winks and curious nods among the men. Lute Wilson, from White Bank, was there; also Hutch and Carter from the Little Juniper. The Miner and his wife came down from the cañon, and the King went to the seat where Mary had been. Even Aunt Betty came with her mistress.

Norton's glance ranged over the crowd, big with animal life; then it came back to the King. As Norton sat studying the gray hair and seamed face he tried to find a resemblance between father and daughter, but it was evident that Mary was like her mother. Gradually his thoughts went back over the times they had met; and that last time, when she had told him she would return with the flowers. He glanced out where the moon was washing the white waste with wan light. It would be many weeks before the glades were a foam of color again. He sighed, rose, and announced the song, and a moment later the lusty voices of the men were rolling along the tune.

Norton read with clear emphasis the words: "I am the way!" He spoke in a calm voice, yet with authority, and they heard him in strained silence. As was his habit he accommodated himself to their modes of life, and told them of the One Trail to the last divide. Tenderly did he speak of Him who had

wrought out the way with purple footsteps and pain.

Life was a hill country, with many gorges and ragged cliffs, over which the bewildered traveler might plunge. There were waterless plains which offered phantom shade, and fountains which were mockeries. Had they not seen men bleach on the desert because they could not find the spring? Habits and raw wickedness left gruesome wrecks along the way. Here Tank Campbell dropped his head and fumbled his hat.

"The Guide sure hit it to-night," he commented to Pony Wilkins as they rode toward the upper ranches. "It got down where I am, for I reckon there's no rider in this valley who has took as many tumbles from the trail as me. I go along all right on the lower slopes, go to sleep in a gallop, and put my saddle on the peg in a dream. But the first thing you knows here comes a bit of trail steep as the Devil's Dive, and down I goes, clean to the bottom; and when I gits my eyes open and looks around, sure as —— there's that bulge-eyed Guber grinnin' at me while he counts up my last month's wages. Then I sez, 'Tank Campbell, you're a bigger fool than any maverick on the range, for what they do is good for 'em and makes 'em fat, but you're shootin' five kinds of daylight out'en yourself with Guber's hogwash'—and them's my sentiments."

As Norton rode into the street he saw old man Anderson sitting on his horse under some pines which grew close to the church.

"If you don't object, I'll ride your way," he said, pushing out into the light.

"Glad to have you," Norton replied, taking the other side of the road. They went on in silence for

some time. It was evident that the old man had something on his mind.

"You see, Guide, I wanted to have a word with you on a matter you have heard about, I reckon. Perhaps I'll not get it so you can understand, but—well, it's this way: I hain't never felt I done the square thing with that other fellow I led to the summit and made him go. What you think about it?"

"About as you do," Norton replied frankly. "Though I think a man who could be scared out so easily as that would have been of very little help to you."

The old man straightened in his saddle. "I never thought of it that way," he admitted, then his face darkened: "But I'd a done the same thing if it had been an angel. That's the part that looks scaly. He seemed to think we was a lot of cattle, and I took the job of playin' even. Didn't give him a chance to say his piece once. But you hain't that sort. Knockin' Scotty out set the valley right that you wasn't no tea-party chap, and we all know you mean what you say, and—you may be right. I guess it's turned out well enough, for if I hadn't run him out, it may be you'd never showed up."

"Perhaps not, and now that I am here I shall do what I can to get things in better condition, and I hope you will all give yourselves a chance to understand."

"I can say for Jed Anderson that he will, for there's a good many ways I could improve."

Anderson rode on in silence for some time, then he broke out suddenly: "Well, you see this whole thing is new to me. I come to these hills before there was shod horses on the trails, or a prospect hole anywhere.

The wolves prowled around our cabins in the daytime. There was no stage road then, and not a house in the Junction. So you will have to take them things into account when you judge Old Jed, for I reckon you know that it's easy to go to the bad." They had reached the Widow Rogers's place, and the ranchman drew up, holding out his hand. "I wanted you to know I held nothing agin' you, Guide, and that I do feel a little mean over the way I treated the other fellow. How's a man goin' to git things off his hands if he don't own up when he ought to?"

Norton gripped the hand, which had gone into his, warmly. "That is the only way, Mr. Anderson, but there are not many who will do it."

"Do you think it's all straight now?"

"I can't say as to that. You know there is a Higher Court with which we must deal. You will have to get things in shape there as well as here."

"I don't know about that, Guide. I've been a hard one in my day, and sometimes the trail looks dark ahead. But I've always figured that if a fellow made things straight down here it would give him a better stand-in at headquarters—eh?"

"You are right in that, but we must feel so because of headquarters—because of God. When He is given his proper place in the affairs of life, then all the rest comes as a result."

"Perhaps that's so, but I don't understand it yet. I'll come and hear you and see if I can figure it out. Good-night." The old man pushed on.

Several had seen Anderson ride away with Norton, and there was much speculating as to what it might mean.

"Another ropin' affair, perhaps," said Swenk laconically.

"Not on your life! I tried that and failed, and Anderson will not make the same mistake," Baldwin replied.

"Something the Guide said to-night got down to him, I think, and made him feel uncomfortable."

"That's about it," Painter added conclusively, for all of them knew old Jed Anderson.

CHAPTER XV

THE DAMASCUS ROAD

GRADUALLY the valley became stirred, and everywhere the church was the leading topic of conversation. In the bunk-houses men debated the subject of religion with a variety of arguments, which, if not always profound, were, to say the least, interesting. But all, whether for or against what Norton was pressing them to accept, came regularly to the church and launched their chesty voices along the simple tunes, exactly as they bawled their songs above the roar of the drive.

Norton was conscious that a strange power, mysterious and convincing, was gripping the people. Miners came down from their cabins, breaking trail through drifts which reached to their waists. Herein lay the secret of the unchanging influence of the Carpenter. It was the same beautiful designing which dressed the forests and painted the autumn hills.

The climax came very suddenly, and in an unexpected way. It was like the breaking of clouds, condensed by a single flash, sending their floods into all the rivers. True to his promise, Old Jed Anderson came regularly, but always sat at the back of the church, as immovable as granite.

The night seemed the proper one for something out of the ordinary, for the stars shone with a cold, blue flame, which brought them into the crisp heaven, open-eyed. The wolves were howling at the rim of the

valley as Norton made his way down to the church, and out of the north came a keen wind. He was touched by a vague something which made him expect some radical interruption of the general order. Mrs. Rogers and Jennie had sung a selection from Cowper, very melting, and Norton spoke at once. There are times when the soul is in a special manner exalted. It may be in the love of pure woman, or when the heart has entered some garden agony with its sweat of blood to make a measureless sacrifice. But these times of ennobling do come, and such was upon Norton that night. Out of his inner self seemed to rush rivers of masterful force, and he announced the supernatural with the voice of a prophet.

Jed Anderson left the service much impressed. An hour later he was found on the road with blood oozing from his mouth. His horse had fallen, leaving the old man fatally hurt on the snow. Norton had just reached home when a messenger came dashing up.

"Old Jed's all in, Guide. Horse fell as he was going home. He wants you to come over."

The next minute the two were swinging along the road at a tearing gallop.

Norton entered and found the old man in bed. "Glad you came, Guide, for I'd like to find the Trail if I could. Do you think you can make it plain to an old man like me?"

"I will try, Mr. Anderson," Norton answered, drawing a chair close to him. "But you must be willing to struggle toward the Pass when you see it. Will you do that?"

"I'll do my best, Guide. Let me see; what was it you said about there bein' a great spring which never

goes dry. A place where there is tall cottonwoods and the grass is full of prayer—that's what you said, eh?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'd like to drink at that spring, for I feel I need it."

"You may, for it runs for the thirst of every man, and it was that which brought you to the church."

"But I don't just understand, though suppose I ought."

Norton took the old man's hand and talked to him as he would unfold some beautiful story to a child. Step by step he led him into the mysteries of his faith, drawing his illustrations from trail and drive, till the pressure of the hand which lay in his told Norton that he was being understood. As he went on, the rugged features relaxed and the weather-beaten face looked almost tender.

"You have made it plain, Guide, and I think I see the Pass—I believe I can keep the trail. Tell the boys that Old Jed would like to have a word with them in the morning."

As the sun rose over the winter-fenced hills, the men came galloping up. There were two score packed in the cabin. In characteristic speech the ranchman addressed them:

"Fact is, boys, I thought I might reach the divide better to say a few things to you before I begin the climb. It's the end of the trail for me, the drive is over, and the camp fire will soon be out. Knew I had to go before long, but the fall hurried things a bit. Hoped I might see the grass grow once more before I hung up my saddle though. But that wasn't to be.

The next time the bunch grass sprouts it will be over me.

"I wanted you to come because since the Guide began the services down at the Junction I have been doin' some thinkin'. I hain't been much help to you, have I? That's it—that's the thing that bothers me some. Here's the King; him and me come here before there was a road. We packed our grub across the hills a hundred miles on horses. He was not just like me in his ideas. I took the ground that anything that beat the other fellow on an open tract was fair racin', and that led me into things that wasn't on the dead square. I don't need to tell you that I've been something of a hard one in my day. I've been on the wrong side of almost everything."

A spasm of coughing shook the old man's frame, and blood appeared on his lips. As soon as he could, he continued:

"I just wanted to tell you that I've done a lot of things in my time I wish I hadn't. But the Guide says the General Overseer understands all that, and I wanted to ask you to look over anything the old man may have done to make it easy for you to go crooked.

"When you go with the next drive there will be more room by the camp fire, for I won't be with you. But maybe you will think of Jed now and then when you come to the old waterin' places, where the boys used to camp when the camas flower was in bloom." The voice broke a little.

"You bet we will, Jed!" came from many.

"It helps me to know that, boys. And now one thing more: Better listen to the Guide, for he knows

the way over the sunset range. That's all. Give me your hand, each one of you, and call it square."

The men filed past the bed, gripping the extended hand in silence; then they rode away without hurry, the greatest evidence of respect.

"Don't that beat anything that ever happened in the hills, boys?" said Alex Sanders, his face a study. "I never took much stock in this religious business till lately, but anything that will lay Old Jed out, fair and square, and make him own up to his meanness is all right and it has my support from this on, that's all."

"A man's a coward who does a thing like that when he has to die. Why didn't he fix things up while he was on his feet?" remarked a rider from an upper ranch.

"But old Jed was no coward; everybody in the valley knows that. Let 'em come, one or a dozen, it was all the same to him, and he never weakened. I've seen him where it took nerve and he had it. But look at him now—mellow as a squash. Fact is, a man may see things different when he has to cross the divide."

"Looks cowardly to me," the other persisted.

"And I say Jed Anderson was no coward!" Sanders answered hotly. "Livin' or dyin', he was a man of sand. I've seen him look down more'n one pistol barrel, and the other fellow doin' the sightin', too. Why didn't he weaken then? He just laughed and told the other fellow that he couldn't hit a flock of brandin' corrals. Call that cowardly? And about this other business—that takes grit, too, for when Old Jed owned up to bein' dishonest that was harder'n fightin' for him." This view of the case seemed to

be generally taken by the rest, and the riders drifted to other subjects.

Norton, the King, and Baldwin remained to the end. It came like the twilight. The ranchman did not talk, but when asked if the trail was clear, a slight pressure of the hand spoke more than words. As they watched, the hard features relaxed, and a settled expression of rest covered them, washing out all traces of sin.

Many-tongued Rumor carried the news of Anderson's death along the valley, and many people came to the funeral. To the crowded church Norton rehearsed all the circumstances of the accident, not forgetting to bring in the confession of the old ranchman. He had faced the last divide without fear and had found the trail leading through the pass.

On a mild declivity, made winsome with small evergreens, the graveyard of the upper valley was situated. There, under a gray sky, the body of the old ranchman was committed to the ground. To the men who stood about Norton addressed himself, assuring them that soon or late what had come to Jed Anderson would come to all. After the drives were over, after the riders had galloped together for the last time, each would be compelled to take the narrow trail out of the world alone. The rope would hang coiled in the straps and the saddle remain unused in the stable. Strangers would take their places by the camp fire and the bunch grass would grow over them. All heard him in silence, and in silence rode away through the hovering mist.

CHAPTER XVI

STRANGE THINGS

THE night after the burial of the old ranchman the church was filled to its greatest capacity; even the space behind the seats was packed with standing men.

All day the topic of conversation had been the change which had come to Anderson at the last. A crowd had gathered at the Circle Ranch, by common consent, and the merits of the case thoroughly gone into.

"I tell you, boys, there's something in it; I don't know just what, but there's something all right. It may be only imagination, for you know that's a mighty strong thing. Why, I've knowed men to think they'd seen ghosts, and that their dead friends came to them in the night. It may be that Jed got that way—what do you think?" The boss of the Lazy Bar Ranch looked dubiously at the floor, showing that his own explanation had not satisfied him.

"But how about him owning up to all his meanness? That wasn't a bit like Old Jed, you can set that down. Why, I knowed a time when he'd a sent lead into a man who'd a called him a thief! Fact! There was a chap here once who got some things on Jed that wasn't just straight, and he was talking a little too much. When Jed heard of it, he put a gun in his pocket and hunted the fellow up. I never heard that he did any more talking. Scared! Well, I guess yes. Left the country the same night. The old man

would shoot it out any old time before he'd admit he was off. But, after all his meanness here he goes and tells on himself. That gets me! And say, boys, did you notice the different look on his face? Why, I've seen Jed Anderson when he'd a made the devil seem good-lookin'. But he sure did look different at the last—I'll leave it to the crowd."

"That's so, Handy—saw it myself, and Tony and me talked about it afterward, didn't we, Tony?"

"Bet we did, Clark."

"I've about come to the conclusion that the Guide knows what he's talking about, all right, and that it's not the worst policy in the world to be ready for the Big Round-Up, and I ain't ashamed to say it, either," broke in Bounds, dropping his feet to the floor with a crash, as he tipped his chair away from the wall, looking at his companions as if he had issued a challenge.

"Look out there, Slim, or you'll be getting religion, like Baldwin, though he ain't got clear out yet." A short burst of laughter greeted this warning.

"And what's wrong with Baldwin, Charley Painter, I'd like to know?" Bounds demanded, glad to make the rider his argument in the case.

"O, he's all right, only he worked on the church, and that's a sure come-down for a rider."

"Well, so did King Morrison, and Sanders, and Pony; he cleaned out the sawdust and boards—I reckon you knew that?"

There was no reply to this, and the silence showed the old ranchman's confession had stirred the valley.

Some who heard Norton's messages woke as from a dream, for in other days they had heard such things,

and the return of the later rain caused the seed of those old sowings to swell with promise of full corn in the ear. King Morrison was one of these. His wife had been a pious and charming lady in her day; and though she had said little to her husband on the subject of religion, he had watched her life and believed in her. In the loneliness which followed her going he had thought much of these things, but contention with his enemies hardened the carnal in his nature, leaving him moody and silent. Norton saw this and understood.

Gradually there came a change over the upper valley. The riders sat more alone in the church. There was no shooting now as they came and went along the roads. That night the bawling note of the drive was missing as the crowd took up the songs. All was full of new and wonderful pathos.

"This is what got Old Jed, and I'm completely throwed, kicked, and run over if I don't believe it's gettin' me," whispered Alex Sanders to Burke, who slouched in the seat next to him. Burke made no reply, for he was staring hard at Norton, and so deep was his absorption that he was unconsciously moving his body from side to side as Norton moved about.

It was a moment tense with the potential. The quiver of a lash might tip the pivoted wills to a wrong decision. What if a wrong word should be spoken, a false movement made? It was supreme, awful! Norton felt his way word by word into the congested mentality about him. He did not try to dominate it; but gathering it about him, he bore it up and on toward the climax which he desired, as the river sweeps the uprooted pine to sea.

It was his way to be calm, and he usually spoke with a sense of reserved force which moved much. But on this occasion it was different. A mighty passion was upon him. A voice had spoken: "Have thou authority!" and his words and gestures made gaps in the resistance before him, like hemlocks falling in a thicket of aspens. The King leaned toward the stand, his brows knit and his hands clenched as if prepared to spring up and decide something which called for the utmost in him. The Miner sat with open mouth, staring hard.

Those who heard Norton that night never forgot it. The discourse was on the famines of the Far Country, and the return of the Prodigal from that land of [illegible]er pools and shadeless sands. The Widow Rogers wept softly, and the Miner's wife leaned against the seat in front of her, overcome with her emotions.

Slowly, and in more pleading tones, Norton urged the application. It was like the hush after a storm. The stillness of death reigned in the room. Norton put the test. Had he spoken the truth? Then they should have the courage to say so. There was his hand. How many of them would resolve that they would take the trail to the Upper Pass of the Hills of the Morning? He would wait and see.

The Miner's wife raised her face, wet with tears, and placing her hand on the shoulder of her husband whispered the low, vibrant word, "Go." The man hesitated. "Do it!" she urged. Suddenly he sprang up, strode forward, and gripped Norton's hand, then stood aside to make room for Scotty Baldwin. Jack Mullens came next, with Alex Sanders and others. The weeping of women filled the house. The Miner's

wife placed her hand in that of her husband, her face beaming. A sensation ran through the room when Scotty Baldwin turned to his companions, saying he felt it his duty to take the stand he had. He hoped all who had sat with him by the camp fire or sweltered with him on the drive would do as he had done.

In his own way, the Miner gave his reasons for stepping out.

"I reckon I might speak a word, Guide," he began, "for it sometimes does a chap good to have his say. Well, you see it's like this: up to the time me and Bill got to be pards I never thought nothin' about bein' rea. for the crossin' of the Great Divide. Always took the ground that it was about like prospectin', jest a matter of chance. I jest lived like the cougars and the grizzly bears. Went from camp to camp, and took pot-luck with the rest of the boys. I knew fool's gold from the real stuff, and could build a cabin in ten days and cover it with shakes, but that was about all—till Bill died. I saw him breathe his last, and he said there was morning on the mountains and I believed him, for no man ever caught Bill in a lie. After that, when the days got long and lonesome, and the bunch grass was growin' between us, I used to read this little book; and there was queer things in it, for they made me feel like I ought to hang up my guns and take another trail, and that's what I've done, and I ain't ashamed of it." The Miner paused and looked at the rapt faces with eyes into which a strange light had come.

When Jack Mullens tried to confess his past mistakes and lapses, after many vows, in a jumble of

words which sadly mixed his meaning, Norton sat down and covered his face with his hands.

The men in the audience were motionless and wondering. A new order was upon them—things many did not understand. To some the change was unwelcome. The old way had been good, and they did not care to put it aside. A line had been drawn among them, and many of their comrades had crossed it, leaving them behind. This was almost a personal matter with them and many rose up and went out. Mounting, they rode away under the patient stars.

There was one thing which grieved Norton very much: The King had not taken a stand. He had expected this confidently, but when he looked the old man was gone.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RETURN OF THE FLOWERS

SPRING had returned to the Valley of the Silver Bow. Wedges of wild geese honked through the upper air, and clouds of swans came down upon the islands. The slopes were mantled in green, and the air was sweet with the breath of wild flowers. The stage made regular trips now across the range, and the riders dashed over the mesas free as their own swift winds.

Norton had tried not to think of this season, yet he had found himself counting the days, and watching the brown spots on the southern hills grow larger.

At last, in a little hollow, he found a johnny-jump-up opening its purple eyes, and he had held it tenderly as though it might, in the destiny of things, be linked to his future. Sometimes he laughed at his thoughts, telling himself that he did not care, and that he was not acting true to the highest things of his life when he gave way to such dreams. The flowers would fade again, he told himself; and if there was promise in the opening, there was also foreboding in the close.

Nevertheless, he did care, and he did think about the return of the flowers, and as a matter of fact he did so very much. When the warm Chinooks came, turning the drifts to tears, and bidding the good brown earth cast off the covering of the storms, he felt a little less the sense of loneliness which had oppressed

him so long. One thing he knew—the flowers had returned, and he was glad.

During the winter he went often to see the King. The old man had found the time very slow in passing, and often spoke of the loneliness of waiting. Seated before the blazing hearth, they talked of many things. The ranchman recalled the time when the camp fires of the Indian could be seen along the streams, and when strange men, clad in the skins of animals, roamed the wilderness. Sometimes they talked of the profound things of faith, and the King asked many questions, which Norton was at great pains to answer in his clear, forceful way.

Days when great storms were on the mountains, Norton would tramp over to the Morrison Ranch and lose himself in Mary's books. It was interesting to do so because they were marked and written over by the girl. These notes, made in her graceful hand, which was characteristic of her, he followed carefully, and by them got a fairly good estimate of her literary likes and dislikes.

With the opening of the trails, Norton turned once more to the distant camps. Many rough hands were extended to greet him on his return, and an extra tin plate and cup on the crude tables were evidence of his welcome.

With the clearing of the divides, Norton had gone to a more distant camp, which had been opened during the previous fall. This trip consumed several weeks, and he shook hands with the men where he had passed the night, and turned homeward as the sun climbed toward the zenith of a bright, warm day. He was glad the time had come to return to the Valley of the

Silver Bow, for he told himself that he wanted to see Baldwin, and the King, and the rest.

He had learned how to pass a night on the mountains under a lean-to, with a fire blazing before it, while the wolves howled about him dismally and the cougars wailed in the cañons. From these camps he would depart with the first gray of the morning, giving Dan an hour in some glade to munch his fill of bunch grass.

The first night of his return was spent high on the mountains, where the air became cold before morning. Some wild thing had walked around him all night, so close at times that he could hear its soft pantings, but it disappeared with the daylight. It was splendid to be alone in the wilderness; to feel that in some marvelous way he dominated the crisp beauty about him. The air had a smell like flowers after rain, and the light fell in sprayed glory into aspen aisles and shadowy hemlock groves. Always, there was something to wonder at, something to worship and love.

The second night he found a cozy nook where a modest valley had been cut from the white wild. Here the pines grew farther apart, letting the stars spill down in clean streams. In that place Norton bowed and worshiped, while the great hemlocks sighed above him. The altars of Jehovah are everywhere. In woodlands, dim with dreams, there are worshipers, and there is prayer in the canary grass.

Norton went his way with thoughts which alternated between keen appreciation and nebulous inner meditations. The third day he was climbing the great range between the Silver Bow and the northern watershed as the twilight fell. The cañons slowly filled with gloom,

and the night birds began to call in the woods. Later the moon rose soft as carded wool.

It was midnight when he reached the summit from which the trail dropped down, with increasing steepness, into the valley. Just where the path went over the pass there was a small spot clear of trees. These strange places may be found everywhere in the wilderness. Exclusive clearings on which the trees and undergrowth refuse to take root. He knew the place perfectly, for he had often turned aside here to look at the wide reach of tumbled hills beyond.

As he entered the glade the wish to enjoy the view came to him, and he went to the right, passing close to the fringe of laurel, which filled the air with its breath. The moon was high and full, and the valley, with the white range beyond, would be like a glimpse into paradise.

As he neared the edge of the opening he drew up suddenly and leaned forward. He was not alone in the glade. Another glance showed him the form of Mary Morrison, sitting her horse, rapt and still.

For a minute he sat watching her intently, then his attention was attracted to a swaying branch at the other side of the glade. Slowly the limbs of the hemlock parted and a dark bulk emerged, passed along the rim of the laurel, stood still for a moment, and then disappeared. When he turned toward the girl he found she had discovered his presence and was watching him narrowly. He moved to her side. A ripple of laughter broke from her lips.

"Our freakish sprite has not lost his whim to bring us together at queer seasons and in weird places. I am very glad to see you, Mr. Norton." She gave him

her hand for a moment. "But you should not have frightened me so. When I turned and saw you there I thought it some materialization from the shores of the Palaeolithic, or the Old Man of the Hills, doing himself knightly honor by a timely appearance."

"If my eyes did not deceive me you have some reason to be afraid," Norton replied. "Something, I could not make out just what, came into the open over there, and after looking at us for a time withdrew. I am quite sure it was not a wild beast."

"What else could it be?"

"A man!"

She laughed disbelievingly.

"Perhaps some trapper or miner, passing over the mountains. There is nothing in this to be afraid of."

"Why did they not keep the trail and go on?"

"You say the man—wild creature—went back into the forest?"

"Yes."

"But even if it were a man, I am not afraid. I have been coming to this place for years. Sometimes the cougars screech at me in the cañons, and the wolves follow me, but I have never been harmed. I love this outlook. Isn't the valley beautiful? It is like a great trough cut in crystal. The night is so full of voices that you don't hear by day. I sit for hours trying to interpret them. When the larks and thrushes go to sleep then the birds of the darkness begin their songs. I am so glad to be back to it again." She hesitated, then went on. "I grew so tired of rehearsals and the hum-drum of city life. I love the free, clean open and the unfenced trails." The last she seemed to say to herself more than to him.

"It is like a dream of Elysium. One does not have to exercise a very great stretch of the imagination to arrange those peaks into the towers of a city. Look!" he pointed to where the splintered heights touched the soft sky. "It is a worshipful city, for there are many temples." After this both lapsed into silence.

At last Norton roused himself and turned toward her.

"When did you return?" he asked.

"With the flowers. You know I promised to do that, and I did."

"Not with the first ones," he protested, laughing.

She glanced at him quickly. "There are some that open at the very rim of the snow; those are gone, but the rest are in their glory."

"I tried to keep your father from going after you, though I think he must have become weary of my visits. Did you find your books disarranged?"

"What of it? My father tells me that you kept him from getting blue. It is time for me to thank you for this, for it meant much to him."

"That was a mutual pleasure, for I found him full of the past, and that is always romantic, you know. The debt is mine and I pay it with gratitude, for I did enjoy the reading."

"I suppose you found passages marked which did not seem worthy to you?"

"A few," he admitted frankly.

"You are ready for an argument, I see." She looked at him archly.

"That would be sacrilege in such a place. Out with the thought of it."

"Some time when you come to the ranch we may have it to the end, but not now."

"There is little gained by it at any time. There are few discussions characterized by candor."

"I am free to admit that you had the better of the argument that day, if that will set your vanity at rest. I have it from the sages that men demand this as their cosmic right."

Norton laughed. "Immaculate woman! Since Eve, was it ever so heard before?"

"That is enough of that. I would rather talk about nature. I see you are still in love with the Queen," she evaded, leading into a sphere which she knew would be agreeable to both of them.

She remained silent for some time looking out on the shining forest. "I was born here, and I have known nothing else. I love it for that reason. Then my mother worshiped it before me. They tell me she used to ride from one sun-washed valley to another, the wind playing toss with her hair. Father says I am like her, and I am glad. I will always return here in thought, though I should roam to the ends of the world."

She turned from him and lifted her face to the light, which streamed over her in idealizing baptism. If Norton had thought her beautiful before, he knew she was divine now. About them—over them—heaved a steady rhythm like the swelling of a breast. They were swimming in a milky sea; not at the crest but at the bottom, among the submerged wonders.

A stick snapped at the rim of the glade. Norton glanced in that direction and waited. Again the branches of the firs were lifted and the dark bulk

appeared. He watched it in silence for some time. Slowly it moved along the edge of the opening. Norton touched the arm of the girl. "Do you see that?" he asked, pointing into the blur where the form showed a trifle darker than the trees.

"I do not see anything," she replied wonderingly. "Do you?"

"Yes; I have been watching it, and I do not believe it is a wild creature, either. It moves like a man. I shall investigate. You stay here for a moment."

Norton dismounted and walked toward the spot, his hand at the holster on his hip. As he drew near, the form leaped into the darkness beyond. Norton heard the snapping of twigs distinctly as the spy made his way down the mountain. Mary joined him at that moment. He struck a light, showing her the prints of a man's feet in the damp earth.

"It is not safe for you to be here alone; you must go away at once."

"I think it must have been some mountaineer disturbed by our talk who came into the open to see what was going on. I am not in the least afraid, Mr. Norton."

"I know you are not afraid, but there is danger, nevertheless. That fellow was watching you when I came in here. You must go down the mountain immediately. I fear there is some harm intended."

In the half light he saw her eyes flash. "But suppose I refuse to go, what then?"

"Simply this: I shall lead your horse down the trail against your will. I could not, in any case, leave you here alone."

"But I would slash your hands with my whip if you did; be assured I would."

"That would make it necessary for me to take it from you," he replied, laughing, but his tone left no doubt in her mind that he meant it.

She searched his face with a glance half anger and half admiration. "But I would get off and stay as long as I wished. You might lead the horse. What then?"

"I would stay with you!" He looked at her evenly. "I hold myself responsible, just now, for your safety, and must do what seems the best, even though you think me wrong. Let us go, for morning is not far away."

Slowly her mood changed. She was looking at him with eyes which began to see him. He was positively splendid. For the first time their wills had clashed, and she felt the domination of his. No true woman was ever perfectly won till man has made her feel he could live without her. He must make her know that he does not want to, however.

"Have your way this time, but remember, I make no promises for the future. I am a leaf of the human autumn, I blow where I list. I have no wish to be a capital letter in society, but in the wild I am a despot. I conjure the nymphs and they have no choice but to play. I think every woman has fawn's ears at her temples if you could see them. To her, Pan is an elder brother. Lead on, fearful iconoclast, I will obey this once." She broke into incredulous laughter, which told him how little she shared in his anxiety.

"Doubtless all that is true, but to-night it is different. You will please ride ahead!" She obeyed.

In silence they made their way down the mountain. At the branching of the ways she paused. "On the theory that there was real danger, I suppose I must thank you for your protection?" Her lips carried a mocking smile.

"I should have been worried to leave you there with a spy watching you—at least, I believe he was—and I feel I could do nothing else."

She made no reply, but flung him a short "Good-night," and was off like a swallow. Norton made his way homeward. He was exalted. His mind followed a delicious train of thoughts. True to his nature, he said nothing of this meeting. It seemed to him it would take from it something sacred if he did. The following morning the Widow Rogers told him of Mary's return, but he made no reply. Richard DuMont would come later, as he was detained on business matters in the South. When he did come the lamented marriage would doubtless take place, and Mary would quit the valley forever.

During the weeks immediately following her return Mary had only attended the services at the Junction a few times. She preferred the free air of the prairie to the confinement of the room, but the King was always in his place, and it seemed to Norton that more and more the hard lines faded from the old man's features.

The great dream of Norton's heart grew with every day. From being a possible thing, it became a passion to see the two valleys united. Thrilled with this vision, he went often to the rival section, speaking to as many as would come to hear him, and going where there seemed any chance of doing the work of the peace-

maker. However, it was very plain that he was not reaching the seat of the hatred which had become a habit, and his heart grew heavy, yet none the less determined.

CHAPTER XVIII

GOING WITH THE WIND

SCOTTY BALDWIN went down to the ford in a sweeping gallop, splashed out to midstream and stopped a minute for his horse to drink. As he did so Mary Morrison approached the opposite bank at an easy canter. She always rode at a rapid pace unless in a thoughtful mood; at such times she permitted Wildwind to take his own gait. At the water's edge she drew up, throwing Baldwin a greeting with her gloved hand. With half-closed eyes she watched the rider breasting through the element toward her.

"Glad to see you, Mary," he said, extending his hand. "I was on my way to hunt you up."

"It is mutual, Scotty," she replied, dropping her hand into his with frank friendship. "Are you really going somewhere or are you just moving because you can't keep still?"

Baldwin laughed. "Both. I was on my way to your place. Your good fairy must have told you so and brought you out here to meet me."

Mary's cheeks deepened to something like carnation. "So much for the character of my protecting spirits. But tell me what is on your mind. There is something very important. I know. Come, sir, don't keep a woman waiting when her curiosity is involved. I know it is worth hearing."

"It is, and you will say so too when I tell you;

but let us go on in a walk, for it is easier for the horses, you know?"

"Well?" Mary broke the silence which had reigned between them for some minutes.

"I was waiting till *he* went by before telling you." Mary followed the line of his vision and saw Norton riding toward them.

He drew up for a moment, then urged important business and rode on.

Baldwin waved farewell, then turned to Mary. "You see, it's like this. Alex Sanders and the Miner and the other fellows have been talking it over, and we feel that the Guide ought to have a little change. Anything gets old, no matter how good it may be. He's always on the go, his round-up never comes to an end. If he could go out and brand the whole bunch and have it done once for all it wouldn't be so bad, but he can't, and that's what makes it hard for him. You watch him—he's never still. There's not a camp within a hundred miles that he hasn't visited, and I suppose he's been in a thousand cabins since coming to the Silver Bow, besides all the care he has given the sick. We think he should have a change with a little excitement, and that we ought to show him that we appreciate what he is trying to do for us." He paused and glanced at Mary. There was encouragement in her face.

"What are you planning?" she asked, interestedly.

"A genuine, old-fashioned wolf hunt that would make the bloods of the Green Dominion black with envy. A chase that would make their best foxhunt seem like a fat man's race on the Fourth of July. Not that we want to be aristocratic, you understand, but

there is need to chase the gray villains off Horse Prairie, for they are killing the young stock right along. The Big Wolf has been operating again, and one of my finest colts is dead. I've tried to trap him, but he's too smart, and he knows when there is poison in the meat. The only thing to do is to chase him down with horses and dogs."

Mary broke into clear laughter.

"How does it strike you?"

"I am delighted!"

"We have had these chases before, you know, and they are worth taking a part in."

"Do you remember the time my horse fell, Scotty? There is danger in it, and that makes it all the better."

"I reckon I do, for I had to help you a mile to a spring, and lead both horses. Close call that. Shall I tell them you are in for it?"

"By all means; though I fear you may have some difficulty in getting Mr. Norton to take part." The blue eyes sought Baldwin's full of haunting mystery.

"That will be all right. He's a good rider and will enjoy the excitement. Saw him jumping his horse across a wash-out on the North Mesa, and when he was gone I went down to measure the distance, and when I saw it I turned cold, for it was about twelve feet, and half as deep. He didn't know I was watching him. One time on Horse Prairie he started a coyote, and I'll be hung if he didn't run him down and shoot him in half a mile. That's a good horse he rides, and he hasn't been wasting his time since coming to the Mountain Land."

Mary's eyes dropped to the neck of her horse.

"When do you plan to go?" she asked in a low voice.

"Right away."

"It is perfectly splendid!" Her eyes were dancing with excitement now.

"Day after to-morrow is the time. The start is to be made from the Widow Rogers's place at an early hour. Have your horse well gaunted."

"Depend upon it, I will," she answered understandingly.

Baldwin turned back to the ford, leaving Mary to go on alone. He must find the Guide and get him to agree to their plans.

Wayne Norton was not lacking in all the consistencies, yet he loved that which called for red blood, and the zest of danger. He was determined not to be molded. He believed that every true man must be himself. He was positively afraid of the stereotyped. Certainly, the work in which he was engaged called for only the rugged and the strong. The Mountain Land would nurse only such a son. Baldwin found, therefore, that he was not only willing but anxious to go. From Norton, Baldwin rode to the Junction, where he found Blake and Painter. These he sent to spread the invitation to all who cared to join the hunt.

The morning for the start dawned cool and clear, and a light breeze moved along the valley. All the bad gods were asleep, and Beauty and Peace renamed the land.

The riders began to arrive early. Handy Smith, the foreman, and Johnson, the trail boss, who could drop a handkerchief and take it up while the worst horse in the hills did its utmost to unseat him, were there.

Tony Swenk came, bringing Pink Purdy, said to be the best rider among the women in the valley, though the upper ranchmen offered to match Mary Morrison against her, but could never get that strange girl to enter the contest. Next came Clark and Charley Painter, with Billy Bowers, and Tot Slater, who sat her horse to perfection, and had what, to Billy at least, was an additional virtue in that she was wholly devoted to him. Blake, Wilkins, and Bounds took companions from among the ranch girls and appeared fluttering with handkerchiefs. Alex Sanders brought the Teacher, as the mistress of the Big Willow school was called. This prim lady of five-and-thirty had ceased to spend her summers at distant resorts, and the reason for the change in her tastes along this line was an open secret among the riders. It is needless to say that Alex Sanders came in for a generous amount of joking, all of which he took with stolid good nature. Scotty Baldwin was the life of the affair. Even mild Jenny Mallow had caught the thrill of the occasion and was ready for the dash over prairie and slope. Mary Morrison came alone, riding very slowly. The entire company numbered fully fifty impatient men and women, to whom the free winds of the open and the pathless spaces were chief passions.

Norton appeared dressed for the occasion in a soft hat, with gauntlet gloves and topped boots. In the inevitable holster at his hip slept a Colt's. A white handkerchief, slipped under the collar of his blue flannel shirt, fluttered over his shoulder. A quirt swung at his wrist, but he wore no spurs. A low whistle from Painter greeted his appearance.

"He's sure a great looker—some class, that. But if we don't leave him in a gulch somewhere, then my name ain't Painter, that's all." This prediction was answered by a nod and a wink from Handy Smith, to whom the remark was addressed.

Scotty Baldwin rode to the front as Norton came down the walk. He had heard the comment of Painter and was anxious that the men might be disappointed.

"As you know, this little affair is in honor of the Guide. He has proved to us all that he is not here just to pass off the time, and we thought a little change might do him good. Besides, it won't do him any hurt to know that we appreciate his work. We respect the real thing wherever we find it, and that's what the Guide is, if I do say it. Under the circumstances, he has the right to be master of ceremonies, and we will ask him to outline the order of the day." Baldwin's half-minute speech was received with wild cheers by the riders.

Norton mounted before speaking. "I shall make them few and fair. There must be no unnecessary crowding, and no one is to use firearms unless well in the lead. The horses are not to be abused. When a mount shows weariness take him out of the chase. Every man shall keep the place that fairness gives him. Let us return to-night with no bloody flanks where spurs have done their work. That is all."

"Good!" ejaculated Baldwin, who was anxious that Norton should be at his best.

"Talks to the point all right, don't he?" commented Painter to Smith, who answered with a side nod of his head.

Norton waited till the hunters had filed past and

took a place at the rear, over the objection of Baldwin, who insisted that he ride in the lead.

"I may ride there before night, but not now, Baldwin, so let me have my way." The rider understood and galloped off.

Norton bowed to Mary as she passed. Beside her rode Jenny Mallow. He noticed the mounts of the two women. Both were superb, but that of Mary was particularly well made. Deep of chest and strong of limb, with all the points for a long, swift race.

Little by little the riders fell apart and the distance between the girl and himself widened, till as they left the valley, Mary and Baldwin were at the front, while he and Jenny Mallow were together at the rear. Norton fancied he saw a faint shadow in her face, though the girl was in her happiest moods otherwise. Gradually they fell into conversation, as the hunt climbed the long slope out of the valley.

An hour later they reached the level of Horse Prairie, where Baldwin had found the dead colt. Suddenly a halt was made, while all eyes were turned in one direction; a cluster of bright figures were gliding over the open, their limbs flashing in the sun.

"Bunch of antelope," said Sanders, jerking his thumb over his shoulder as he turned to Norton. "Nothin' on earth can catch 'em but a bullet, and you have to start that at the same time they do or they will go off and leave it."

The herd had turned on the skyline and circled back with characteristic curiosity. A pistol shot rang out and a bullet raised a dust cloud not twenty paces from the leader. "Watch 'em go, Guide!" called Sanders, replacing the revolver in its holster. Thoroughly satis-

fied that danger threatened them, the herd swept over the heave of the prairie and was lost in the dim vastness beyond.

When they reached the carcass of the colt, Baldwin dismounted.

"Better get down and loosen your cinches and let your horses breathe for a while; it means everything on a long run. The game is not far off, and we want to be ready." Baldwin set the example by lifting his saddle, permitting the air to circulate under the blanket, and the others did the same. Going to where Mary was arranging her saddle he offered to help her, but received a good-natured rebuke which he took with a smile. Norton had seen this and insisted that he be of service to Jenny Mallow, who permitted him to tighten her cinch and help her into the saddle. The next minute they were off.

The course was now in the direction of Juniper Hollow, for Baldwin insisted that the wolf would be found somewhere in that region. There were caves in the rocks where the animals had always had their dens, and he had heard them howling there one evening not long before.

"Why is it called Juniper Hollow?" Norton asked.

"There is a lone juniper tree grows there, not far from a spring which is black with alkali. It is said that an Indian was killed near it in the old days. There is another water hole farther up where the antelope and horses go to drink. I recall a squib of rhyme which expresses it quite well."

"Repeat it, please."

"Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes."

GOING WITH THE WIND

"I may not be able to remember it all, but it goes something like this:

"A path cut deep where the gaunt things go,
Wraiths of famine and shapes of woe,
Shambling, mangy, spectral;
From the blistered pass to the arroyo,
With its one black cedar and blacker well.
Some white bones there,
Some bleached bones bare,
And something that curses the rainless air—
That is the desert."

"It is certainly to the point, and if there is more of it, let me have it."

"I am not sure that I can recall it now. Let me think a moment:

"A dull gray stretch is all of it,
An aching waste where phantoms flit;
With a floor of stone like a frozen sea,
A walless room where God might sit
And brood creations yet to be.
Where the Wind Angels fly,
Where the Wind Angels sigh,
Where the Wind Angels lie
On a cacti bed, where the Wind Angels die.
And the sand's teeth slash at the lava's veins,
Till their dry blood sprinkles the lakeless plains—
That is the desert."

"Is the picture correct, Mr. Norton?" she asked, turning toward him.

"It is perfect. I know by experience. Once, when crossing from one range to the other, I lost my way and was compelled to spend the night on the lava beds without water. All night my horse stood beside me, restless with thirst. There were black, scowling bluffs not far away, and the circling buzzards seemed waiting for something to sink down and die. Late the next day I came to a spring, but it was black, and very

bitter with a smack of salt. We could not drink it. Under the stars that night I found a pool in the foothills. It was delicious!"

"How you must have suffered."

"There is no torture like it, it seems to me. But what is causing the riders to halt?"

Before the question could be answered the cry of the chase echoed over the ridges. Riding to one side, Norton saw a large wolf outlined against the brown slope. The animal did not appear frightened just then, but stood bristling and sniffing the air. The shaggy, almost stubby tail, dropped at a menacing angle, while the broad head was turned defiantly toward the company. Scotty Baldwin beckoned for Norton to come to the front.

"It is proper for you to lead the chase, Guide, for it is in your honor. Of course, in the end it is the best horse that will win, but you start the thing. That is the old murderer who has been eating my blooded horses for two years. I know him. He is sassy, and never runs till he gets ready. I've tried to kill him a dozen times, but he seems to bear a charmed life, if magic may apply to wolves. But he must not escape this time."

Norton consented with a mental reservation that he would drop back and let others have the lead. The dogs were brought to the front and unleashed, a half dozen shaggy brutes with bristling muzzles and bellowing voices, in whose limbs there were endless steel-like contractions. The wolf, convinced now that harm was intended him, passed over the hill in a long easy run, casting cautious glances over his back as he passed from sight. With a thrilling hunt cry the dogs swept

away on the scent, and the plunging horses, bearing their feverish riders thundered after them.

All formation was lost on the instant. Beyond the rise a green stretch of country dropped gently down toward a dim line of cotton woods which marked the course of a stream. Over this the wolf went with a half-mile lead. Running far and free, the dogs sent back their throaty challenges, which kindled the blood and loosened the rein. Many began letting out their horses, and the thunder of hoofs was like the stampede of a vast herd.

"Save your horse for the first hour, and when he gets into the second sweat ride hard and he will stand it. Do you understand?" Baldwin had ridden in close to Norton to give him this caution.

"I do," Norton replied as the ranger dashed away. He knew that a chance had been given him to make his place more secure among the people of the valley, and if he could match them at every point he would win, but if he failed through lack of fitness he must suffer the loss. Therefore, he would do his best.

Tot Slater and Pink Purdy rode well to the fore. It was evident they had come to take first honors at any cost. Billy Bowers and Swenk followed. Norton knew there was no horse in the hill country that could out-match Dan in a test of speed and strength, and he understood how to get all his splendid energies on demand. Many passed him with excited exhortations to dash ahead, but he gave no heed. He soon saw that Mary Morrison was pursuing his own tactics, for she was dropping to the rear. In a few minutes they were riding side by side in a long, easy gallop. She smiled as Norton came up, her eyes bright with excitement.

"You are saving your horse," he said, turning his face from the wind.

"Yes. It is foolish to break them on the first dash. After they get warm they can stand it, and you know the hard riding is at the last."

"I was doing that, too. But there are many who seem to be trying to get as far to the front as possible."

"Tot Slater and Pink Purdy have made their boast that they will win or kill their horses. That is why they have gone so far to the front. But we are chasing a very swift wolf, I know by the ways he keeps the lead, and that means a long run. Ten miles is all their horses will stand the way they are crowding them. We will do our best to win, won't we, Wildwind?" Mary stroked the sorrel neck of her horse with a caressing hand, and Norton hoped inwardly that she might bear off the honors of the day.

Side by side they swept around the hill and a wide basin country opened before them. Together they leaped a gully and skimmed along a brief level.

"Isn't it splendid?" she cried. He had never seen her so stirred.

"This is the hunt of Fitz James in a better land than that of Roderick Dhu. Yonder hill is our Ben Vorlich, and this plain is Cambusmore. We are sweeping through far Menteith now, and those wooded cliffs are on Benvenue. Aho! for the chase! for we follow dogs swifter than Saint Herbert's breed." She flashed him a glance that was a challenge he understood. Would he pit himself against her? She saw he would not. She wished he would. She did not care for the rest, but this man was worthy of her steel. Again he

caught her eyes. They said that he should enter the contest against her, but he shook his head. Then they would wear out the toil together, that is, if he could keep beside her; if not, she would ride down the wind alone and sweep away into the waste.

The wolf had gone to the timber and was following the course of the stream. This was evident from the baying of the dogs. Norton and Mary swerved to the right and rode toward the head of the valley. The wolf was still far ahead and running at high speed. As Norton and Mary reached the upper end of the belt of woods the dogs emerged, their stirring bell-notes echoing across the slopes. The wolf had taken to a rocky ridge which ended abruptly four miles beyond, where the Mud Springs seeped from high black cliffs.

Baldwin had anticipated this by a long cut-off, and succeeded in turning the brute back into the valley. Tot and Pink were still in the lead, their horses flecked with foam and breathing hard. Bowers and Swenk were close behind. Slowly, not all at once, Norton and Mary began to slack rein, their horses responding with long gathering leaps which brought them to the front. The chase had now covered about eight miles, and many of the hunters were far in the rear. Painter had been compelled to drop out with a lame horse, the sprain received in leaping a gully.

"It's the Lower Valley against the Upper Valley," said Mary, as Norton held in till she could regain her place beside him after leaping a hollow. "But they rode too hard at first, and their horses are fearfully winded. It is time to get ahead of them!" With the word she was off like a swallow. Thus shoulder to

shoulder the two horses swept across the long slopes of the grassy land.

On a rise of ground the wolf showed plainly not a hundred yards ahead. From his frothy jowls lolled a long, red tongue, and it was evident that he was not able to lead off from his pursuers. Tot and Pink were close behind. Five minutes later Mary and Norton were riding neck and neck with them. Ten miles had been covered, and yet the mounts ran with the marvelous strength of the mountain horse. The dogs were behind now, and many of the riders becoming entangled in the timber, or in hollows, had dropped out.

The wolf swerved toward a low ridge, the farther end of which dropped to the level of Horse Prairie. The thin face of Pink Purdy showed her determination to win, for she seemed to hold her flagging mount to first place by sheer force of will. Still running free, the wolf took his course toward Juniper Hollow. He was fifty yards ahead, and that was being shortened at every leap of the horses.

"Now, Wildwind." Norton heard the words and saw the horse respond to Mary's words. The next instant they were riding together in the lead. Now there was a full length between them and Pink and Tot. This was widened to double that distance. Mary soon glanced back, then she shot Norton a look of triumph.

"'Twere vain to tell what steeds gave o'er
As swept the hunt through Cambusmore."

He glanced at the reeking horses:

"What reins were tightened in despair
When rose Benledi's ridge in air,"

he replied.

The finish was at hand. The tired mounts had given their all, and the sting of quirt and prick of spur could not put into their exhausted muscles what poor horsemanship had taken out. The wisdom of a slow start was showing itself. Tot and Pink were far behind, while only a hundred feet separated Norton and Mary from the wolf. Tot drew a small revolver and fired—once, twice, three times, the bullets going wild.

"Try your skill," Norton said, the gray blur now in open position ahead.

"No, no, I want you to do that," she objected. "Come, be quick!"

Norton aimed high, the bullet just touching the long black bristles of the neck.

"You missed—you did not try."

"I missed. Take your chance. I refuse to try again unless you do. The Hollow is only a mile ahead. Hurry!"

Mary fired. The lead must have burned close at the roots of the hair, for the wolf leaped high, snapping savagely.

"Try again," he commanded.

"No, no—you!"

Norton missed purposely.

"Now it is my turn," she panted, her eyes very bright. Her hand snapped forward, and at the report the wolf doubled into a snarling heap and went rolling along the ground, a tiny hole through his neck. The next instant the hounds came bellowing up and set upon the carcass. The race was done, and skill and endurance had given it to the upper valley.

From the top of the hill, Baldwin sounded the rally, the clear notes of the horn echoing away to the distant

hills. He had purposely held back that his friend might have a chance to win. Tot and Pink rode away very much disgusted with the turn affairs had taken, each one seeking to relieve her feelings with such comments as best suited her mood.

"Did you really try to hit him, Mr. Norton?" Mary questioned, looking up. "Or did you just pretend, and then let me go on till I happened to reach a vital spot?"

"I tried, really I did," Norton answered, laughing.

"Tried *not* to hit him, you mean."

"You should not expect me to match you in that line. Think of it, I have only been here something like a year, and you people were to this manner born."

"But I know you can do it. How about the coyote you killed over by the lone juniper, and that on the dead run? You have learned somewhere."

"How did you know that?" he asked wonderingly. "Are you a sprite, or do you possess witch qualities?"

"Some one saw you."

"Who?"

"You did, didn't you?" Mary evaded, as Baldwin rode up in company with Jenny Mallow.

"I own it, but it was an accident."

"So was this," she answered, pointing to the wolf.

"Who gave him the lead?" asked Sanders, dismounting.

"Miss Morrison," Norton answered. "It was a pretty bit of work."

"Mary knows how, all right," Sanders replied.

"He didn't try at all," Mary protested.

"I told you I tried, Miss Morrison."

"And I said you tried *not* to hit him. But I will

dedicate the pelt to you, and whenever you see it you will be reminded of your generosity."

"Better let me have it for a few days and I will tan it," said Sanders, tying it behind his saddle.

"It's eight miles to the valley, and we should move along. It won't do to let the horses cool off standing. That's the way fevers and stiff joints happen," said Baldwin, mounting and riding away. Jenny Mallow went to the lead. Norton saw them riding together a little later, and he dropped back to think his own thoughts. Mary was of the same notion, and Norton entered into conversation with her again. In this manner they passed on through the slanting sunshine, while long shadows came down from the shoulders of the mountains like capes.

"Give us a real sample of your skill, Mr. Norton, by winging that hawk up there," said Mary, pointing to where the bird was busy picking at something in its talons. "I just saw him catch that little trail runner, and he ought to die."

"If you will try first, Miss Morrison."

She fired, and the bird rose a dozen feet in the air, settling again in the old position unharmed.

"Did you hit him?" he asked.

"Certainly I tried," she laughed, buoyantly.

"Tried not to hit him. We are even now," he added as he brought the beaked pirate fluttering down the rocks.

"The books balance now, and we will call it even," she replied, something of the old reserve coming back to her.

Twilight had settled over the Mountain Land as the hunters went down into the valley. The moon

rose full, and out of the grass came the chirr of insects. There was odor in the moth-haunted dusk.

The last few miles Mary and Jenny rode together far in the lead, while Baldwin and Norton drew away from the rest and entered into conversation.

"How was it, Guide?" the ranger asked at the parting of the ways.

"Splendid! A large chunk of real life, a smack of the genuine."

The two men looked at each other for some time in the falling dusk, before either spoke.

"I am glad you enjoyed it," Baldwin answered at last. Then he shook hands and rode on.

"He seemed to enjoy riding with Jenny pretty well," Baldwin mused as he went along. "Well, why shouldn't he? She's an angel, and he—he's every inch a man." The rider sighed heavily and his face filled with shadows.

Other thoughts were in Norton's mind at that moment. "Mary Morrison thinks far more of Baldwin than she does of DuMont," he was saying. "They were much together to-day, and what is more to be expected? They have known each other from childhood, practically; anyway, for many years, and he is handsome, with every point a woman could like in a man."

"Scotty Baldwin cares for Mary Morrison and she likes him; I believe I saw it to-day," Jenny Mallow said to herself when alone, while tears wet the long lashes.

At the window of her own room, the soft moonlight touching her hair with an upleap of mystery, Mary Morrison told herself that Wayne Norton had found

Jenny Mallow a very enjoyable companion. For a long time she sat with her eyes fixed on the great mountains beyond. Strange thoughts were in her mind, thoughts she could not explain. Beyond the road the ground owls were complaining, and the old pine at the corner of the house was filled with cosmic sadness. When she recalled herself she noticed with a sigh that the great dipper was well around its silver circle, and she turned from the scene with eyes which burned with unwept tears.

CHAPTER XIX

THE WAY OF LOVE

"CAN you come down a moment, Mr. Norton? You are wanted," called Mrs. Rogers at his door. He had gone to bed very weary from a long trip over the mountains, and had almost instantly fallen asleep.

"Be there in a minute," he answered, springing up and beginning to dress.

In the parlor below a slight, girlish figure waited impatiently near the door, whip in hand, with which she made short, quick strokes at her riding boots. She was mottled with dust and bore every evidence of having ridden hard. Norton recognized her instantly. It was Tot Slater.

"I hope you will forgive me for coming at such a time of night, Mr. Norton, but I had to. I did not know who else to go to. Will you come?" Her voice broke and her eyes blurred with tears.

"If I can help you in any way, I will. What has happened?" Norton waited.

"It's Billy Bowers! They've got him to gambling down at the saloon, and—and—he's losing all he'd saved, and it meant so much to—to—us both. Won't you come and get him to quit? He never did this way before. He works for my father, you know, and he's saved for two years, 'cause—'cause—" Tot dropped her head and her cheeks colored.

"I understand, and will do what I can. Let us go before those thieves have it all."

The eyes of the girl were full of gratitude as she raised her glance to his. "I knew you would! You are not afraid of them, are you?"

Norton smiled. "No, I am not afraid," he replied. "How did you find out that he was there?" As he spoke Norton took his holster from a deer's horn and buckled it about his hips, while the girl looked at him wonderingly. He repeated the question.

"Why, old man Pierce, who lives up in the cañon, told my father. You know he drinks sometimes and he'd been down to the saloon and saw Billy there, and came up and told us. I thought of you right off, and I came, 'cause—'cause—you are so strong and brave and good to folks, I knew you'd get him out."

"Who is he gambling with?" Norton asked, wishing to get away from the personal element in the conversation.

"That villain Monte Ray!" The girl's eyes flashed.

"I thought so," said Norton, laconically.

"He's an awful wicked man, and has killed several people, so I've heard. I'm dreadfully afraid of him. He may kill Billy. Do let us hurry, please!"

The two women watching Norton saw his lips shut tight and the old look come into his eyes. "We will try and manage this man Monte Ray, somehow," he commented in a very decided way. "I will be at the front gate in a minute." In a short time the women heard him riding down the graveled walk.

"You will forgive me for all the bad things I said about you the day of the hunt, won't you?" the girl said penitently.

"Did you say something mean about me that day?" he asked, laughing good-naturedly.

"I was cross 'cause—'cause you and Mary Morrison beat. I did want to win so bad, but I rode too hard at the start, and it was my fault and I had no business being out of sorts with anyone else. I'm sorry for it now, Mr. Norton."

"Never think of it again; it is nothing, girl," he answered reassuringly. They were off now and riding at a tearing gallop down the road.

A few minutes later the lights of the Junction came to view.

"Stay here and hold my horse. Don't leave your saddle, while I go in and see what can be done," Norton commanded as they came up before the saloon. Dismounting, he threw the reins to the girl and made his way toward the door.

When he had gone half a dozen steps the girl called him back: "It might be he'd come quicker if I went along. You know Billy and me are—that is, we—"

"I understand," Norton interrupted. "But the place is filled with a wild crowd to-night, and they have been drinking. It wouldn't be safe. I can do all that is necessary, and he—will come!"

Tot watched the tall figure making its way among the horses till it disappeared through the door. Then she fastened her eyes on the stew inside. The things she saw and heard dazzled, frightened her. The mirrors under the lamps made the place seem on fire. Out of the glare came snatches of drunken song. These shocked her. She had never heard men say such things before. Her fears for Billy increased. It was in such surroundings that men were killed. What if the gambler should decide to add Billy to his list? The thought brought instant action. The

girl slipped from her horse and made her way swiftly toward the door.

Many recognized the tall form of Wayne Norton as he pushed through the crowd.

"What the devil brought him here!" ejaculated Tank Campbell, whose face indicated that he had not been a great distance from the bar during the evening. "That's the Guide, chaps. I know 'im. He's the one who downed Scotty Baldwin and set on 'im. There's somethin' up, or he wouldn't show his face in this stew. Watch 'im!"

A hush fell on the crowd. Norton approached the table where Billy, feverishly intent upon winning back what he had lost, was putting up his last stake.

"It's Billy he's after," Campbell went on half to himself. "The boy's about cleaned, all right, and it's too bad. A chip off the Campbell block exactly. Has a sweet chick of a girl, and so have I, if I was worth shootin'. The boy's goin' in the way us older dogs have led him. Guess I'll just see how this thing comes out."

"I want you, Billy. Come with me." Norton's voice was level and hard. The boy looked up with eyes burning with passion and the frenzy of the game.

"He's robbed me, curse him! He's robbed me! He didn't play fair. My wages is gone, everything I'd saved. Let me alone! I'll uncover his trick, I'll learn his play—the scoundrel. I'll win it back, every dollar of it. He shan't have it, no, sir; he shan't. It was the money Tot and me was to start life with, and he has it all but the last five." The boy threw the money on the table. The gambler smiled, his manner cold as ice.

"I say you're going with me, do you understand? Get up from there and come on or I'll take you." In the stillness every word fell sharp as the breaking of glass.

The face of Monte Ray turned a hue paler, and his teeth just showed in a dangerous smile under his black mustache: "I shall have to shoot you, my meddlesome friend, if you do not instantly take yourself off. You have ten seconds to do it in." With an easy movement the gambler dropped his hand to his hip, but the next instant he looked straight into the gaping mouth of a Colt's, and the hand which held it did not tremble. The spot above his eyes which the weapon covered was not larger than a quarter. The gambler looked from the revolver to the eye behind it. There was no flicker there. This was no "bluff," he knew that.

"I came for this boy, and I advise you not to interfere in any way, Mr. Monte."

"You seem to hold the winning hand—just now—and I am at your service," the gambler replied indifferently.

"I certainly hold the winning number, and you will please put on the table all you have taken. I will give you ten seconds in which to get it there."

"And if I refuse to do it, what then?" The smile was a sneer now, and the voice a snarl.

"This is your last game if you do!" The hammer of the self-acting weapon began to raise very slowly. When it had gone up an inch it would come back. Monte Ray understood all that. Sometimes men's brains fall into strange associations with iron and lead. There was nothing for it but to obey.

"Put the entire amount on the table," Norton commanded as the gambler hesitated. "Count it, Billy, and see if it is all there," Norton went on as the roll of bills fell upon the table, accompanied by a curse from Monte Ray.

"Yes, it's all here, every dollar of it, and I'm done. This is enough for me," said the boy, placing the precious roll in his pocket.

At this instant Tot appeared. "O Billy, Billy! Do come out of this awful place," she cried, clinging to his arm, her eyes full of fear. Billy turned toward her with an exclamation of wonder.

"Then it was you, Tot, who went for the Guide? I wondered how he knew." The arm of the youth stole around the young shoulders. "I have it all back, every dollar of it, and you can set it down that I'll keep it. No more of this for me. I thought I could double it, you see. But he's a thief, and cheated clear through."

"Then let us go home, please, Billy," she pleaded, trying to draw him to the door.

"Not yet. The Guide may need me. This villain would kill him in a minute. Here, some of you chaps, loan me a gun and I'll cover him while the Guide goes out. And he won't move either, for he knows I'd plunk him like a coyote."

"There is no need of that, Billy," said Norton quietly. "You will please stand up, Monte Ray, and turn around with your hands above your head. That's it. Now please remain in that position while some one relieves you of your weapons." There was no need of taking risks, for the gambler was known to be a dead shot and lightning in his movements.

"I'll just look after that little matter, if you please,"

said Tank Campbell, going through the pockets of the gamester and transferring a knife and two revolvers to his own person. "It's time to close up for to-night anyway, and seein' I owes this gent a little grudge to the tune of a good horse and saddle it will be somethin' of a pleasure to close him out. You there, behind the bar—off with that apron and git. Understand? Git, I say! This place is in the hands of a receiver—and that's me." The bartender obeyed instantly, for trouble was in the air. Then, gripping the gambler by the collar, Campbell administered a kick to that disarmed individual which effectually removed him from the door as well as the front porch, with the admonition to make scarce.

At the forks of the road, Norton, Billy, and Tot were overtaken by Campbell.

"Didn't mean to butt in, Guide, but it sure did look bad to leave the whole thing to you. But you played the game pat, and I hopes Billy will take a hunch and keep clear. You hear me, kid? If I catch you around that bog-hole again I'll throw you out. Git me? You've got a top-notch girl, and you go and buy them cows and fix up the little ranch in the cañon. Don't be a horse-headed fool like I've been. Look at me, will you? I've flipped enough over that bar to buy a drove, and I hain't got nothin' but a bad name, a horse and a saddle. I wish the whole drinkin' business was in hell, where it belongs. I repeats it—don't be a fool like me. Go along now with Tot, and git that money into horns and hoofs as soon as possible; there's a good boy." In silence the two men watched the happy couple fade into the moonlight, each one busy with his own thoughts.

"That was good advice you gave the boy," said Norton, turning to Campbell. "Why don't you take it to yourself? There's always a chance to do better, you know."

"Maybe that's true. But as long as that place is here I reckon I'll be comin' over and spendin' money. It's mighty hard to make a river run back up where it come from. I don't know much else; besides, there's no other place to go to. When I comes along, why it's 'Hello, Tank, have somethin',' and the first I knows I'm at the bar. But a man who hain't got no folks gits lonesome, and what's he goin' to do? A bunk-house is plenty bum after while, and the ranch women don't want a chap loafin' around the house, especially one like me. So there you have it. But I must be rollin'. Reckon Monte will have it in for the two of us now, eh?" Without waiting for an answer, Campbell dashed away, the clatter of his horse's feet stilling the whip-poor-wills far up the mountain side.

As Norton rode home in the after night, the words kept repeating themselves to him: "What is a man to do who is lonesome and has no folks? There is no other place to go." It was true, and Norton set his mind to find a remedy for that condition.

CHAPTER XX

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

THERE had been one other pleasure party much more to the liking of Norton and Mary Morrison. It consisted in a fishing trip to the great lakes cupped in the granite by forgotten glaciers. There the strange red fish, said by the Indians to be the blood stain from the broken heart of the chief's daughter, were to be found in abundance.

The journey had been made over devious trails which wound above vast cañons and forested basins. There were world-old trees full of cosmic sorrow, with beds of nutty cones under them.

Camp was made in a little opening among the hemlocks, where a half dozen deer had been feeding.

On every hand were things to interest and hold the attention. The whining of an elk herd echoed down from remote mesas, shut in with bitter cherry and aspens. Some swans rose from a small bay and crossed the lake like the fragment of a cloud. Norton and Mary went around the lake in the crude boat which some one had constructed and left to the next visitor. It was at the falling of the twilight, and the first stars were standing still above the mountains. For some time they sat watching the deepening night, and feeling the touch of silence and solitude.

The girl had been her old vague self. She had said little, but her eyes were gloom-haunted, and her manner reserved, only in that way which is the best of

all familiarity—the reserve of fellowship. Seated a few feet from him, her face meshed in filmy beauty, Norton felt that his glance almost profaned her, and he looked away. The moon-mist fell between them, and she seemed a white grace passing through the night. Many times she dropped her hand to the water, permitting it to trail through the pure element. It was when she did this that he saw the ring, which reminded him that she had given her vow, and with a cramping at his heart he knew she treated him as one who recognizes an obligation.

After an hour on the water they came back and tied up the boat. Then they went down through the wonder-haunted forest, where the trees stood up like tall brothers, great-limbed and full of dusk. The summer was waxing old, though the days were still warm. There was the smell of ripening wood, and the chirr of voices which seemed to make haste to sing one more love-note before they would be hushed forever. Mary and Norton said little, though the rest of the company made the wood ring. To them the wilderness held a subduing spirit, and they rode homeward side by side, feeling much but speaking only occasionally.

The drive was over and the teams had returned to the valley bringing supplies for the winter. Many new books arrived against the long nights when the snow would lie deep over the Land. Before long the fall riding would begin and the herds be brought down to the feeding grounds.

One night Norton was interrupted at some late writing by Tank Campbell, who declared that the devil was to pay down at the Junction. Later he explained that

a man had been "dropped" in a saloon fight an hour before, and that he had asked to see the Guide.

Campbell came out with an oath. "That's a hard nest, for sure. Wish the place was a-fire, sill and rafter. No show at all for a chap like me as long as it's there. This man was a friend of mine—I reckon I wasn't much of a lift to him, either—and I jest wanted to do the square thing by him, you understand?"

Norton found the man quite dead, and left the saloon with the determination to do all in his power to wipe the plague spot from the valley. From Baldwin he learned later that the man was a favorite among the riders, and never quarrelsome except when drinking.

At the funeral the church was crowded, and Norton pressed home the necessity of driving Guber from the valley. He pointed to the casket before him as proof of the evil influences of the institution, and closed by repeating the word of Tank Campbell, who confirmed them with a nod of his head. After a moment's reflection he appointed a night the following week in which they would gather at the church to discuss some matters relating to this subject. He had some things to work out, and they could give him their opinions at that time. Campbell, who felt much elated at being quoted publicly, repeatedly assured Norton that he would be on time.

A wave of curiosity passed down the valley. Riders discussed the possible reasons for the meeting, and the man Guber questioned all who came into his place.

"Guber's got every dollar of mine for years, and I hain't got nothin' to show for it but a saddle and

a horse. And it's dug into my muscle, too, for I ain't the man I was onct. I'd be mighty glad to help put the joint out," Campbell declared on several occasions; for all the rangers agreed that the meeting concerned the saloon in some way. He had been more to the point one day when he and Charlie Painter met at a spring.

"It's not only cut me all up and shot me to ribbons, but it's done a lot of dirt to other folks as well as me. The boy who was killed t'other night was a mighty fine chap, only when he was drinkin', and he'd a been at home in his bunk if the saloon hadn't been here." Here Tank broke into a volley of oaths in which endless curses were heaped upon his own head as well as that of the man Guber.

"He was a friend of yours, then?" Painter asked sympathetically.

"He was that! Learned him to ride and throw the rope, with a pile of tricks, and—and—I guess I gave him his first drink; I don't know." The rider drew the back of his hand across his eyes, then looked away to the wavering line of blue hills. Suddenly he turned to his companion:

"Hog-tie me, Painter, but I'll hit that thing hard if I git a chance, and don't you go on and forget it!"

Painter thrust out his hand, which Campbell grasped impulsively. "I'm with you, Tank. Put her there!"

"It'll be the best thing that ever happened to me if that place is burned down, and I've come mighty near doin' it, too, many's the time. Look at me! Ridin' all the time for years, and I hain't saved enough to buy a cow with; and all the time, the finest gal in the mountains has just been waitin' for me to become

a man, and she's mine! I'm ashamed of it, Paint, the devil's my brother, if I ain't! It's time I'm bracin' up if I'm ever goin' to, I know that."

Campbell rode away, bawling a reminder to Painter not to forget the date of the meeting. Norton had thought much since the funeral, trying to mature plans by which those meshed in the toils of Guber's influence might be liberated. One thing was sure: he could not accomplish his greatest work so long as the saloon remained. But how to remove it was the question which he found hard to solve. In the philosophy of unhindered right, the place had no just reason to exist, and should be at the mercy of any force able to destroy it. It had been hinted that Guber had established the place without due process of law, and that he held his charter by consent of the officers of the county, who were willing to accept half the amount of what the legal price would have been to let the place alone.

On his way to the meeting, Norton turned aside at the secret place and spent half an hour. He found the church filled when he arrived, and noticed that all were restless with expectation. The general interest taken in the meeting was indicated by a steady hum of voices and a moving of forms which was unusual. Mary Morrison sat with the King in the old place, her face wearing an air of indifference, as though her thoughts were somewhere else. Tot and Billy sat well to the front; so did Campbell and Painter. They had not mentioned the meeting at the water hole, but both were actuated by the recollection of it.

The meeting opened in the ordinary way. The men launched their voices on the songs with all the fervor

of the drive. The devotions were followed by a song from Mary and Jenny which seemed to have been arranged for the occasion:

"When trails are dim and grown with grass,
And darkness settles still and wide;
Be strong, go on, you'll find the pass,
There's light along the Great Divide:
Climb up to it and take its kiss—
The light along the Great Divide."

Norton saw Campbell turn and nod his approval to several of the riders. He had followed every word of the several stanzas and understood. In pleading tones the voices of the women lingered over the crude measures, causing many to feel a glow of desire to follow its lessons. Another hush fell on the crowd as Norton rose to speak.

He began very deliberately:

"Since that night I was called down here to do something for a young man who was being robbed in a gambling game [here Billy dropped his head sheepishly], I have been wondering what could be done to counteract the influence of that place. A remark made to me by Mr. Campbell—you remember I referred to it the day of the funeral—set me to thinking, and I come to you to propose what I think we might call a Mutual Improvement Society." A buzz ran through the house. Norton waited a moment, then continued: "I mean just that: 'A Mutual Improvement Society.' We have heard in the song that we are to climb the divide ourselves, and then we are to help others up the trail, knowing that some will never get out of the tangle if we do not." Norton glanced keenly over the eager faces turned toward him. "There are a few

rules which I think we should observe if we conclude to go into this thing. I will read them:

"First—I will wholly abstain from the use of intoxicants, and shall do what I can to get others to do the same.

"Second—I shall not use profane language.

"Third—I shall act honestly and fairly toward all, honoring the character of woman.

"This society shall be governed by the usual officers, and hold its meetings as often as is convenient—say once each week. The order of the program is debates on timely subjects, good music, and personal good fellowship. The aim is always to do the very best we can for everybody else."

There was silence for some time after the reading of the rules. The men were thinking. Norton knew there were some who looked upon the simple requirements as utterly impossible of accomplishment.

"If we had a place where we could meet for physical features and the privileges of reading I would be glad to arrange it, but at present there are no openings along that line." Here Campbell nudged Painter savagely, giving him a knowing look. Norton continued: "We will now take the names of those who may be willing to become members of this organization. We have done much in the past to the harm of ourselves and others, let us now take a step in the other direction. Don't forget the young man we buried, and where he lost his life, and why." Norton drew a small stand to the front and placed paper and ink upon it, then stepped back.

"But suppose a fellow puts his name down and then don't keep the pledge? It's mighty hard for a puncher

to keep from swearing when the herd gets hot. What I want to know is: What would become of his membership in this here society if he should break loose?" This from Blake.

"No man will lose his membership by such a slip. It is expected that there will be lapses. The pledge is to keep the member trying, and trying hard, to do better by himself and the other fellows."

"Well, then, I'll sign it all right," said Blake, getting into the aisle, and going to the table, followed by at least forty others, who came with stormy comments and much effort to mix the ridiculous with the sublime.

By common consent, Baldwin was chosen president, with Jenny Mallow as librarian. This feature of it had to be explained. Norton stated that she would look after the books which would be collected in case they found a place to put them. A committee was then appointed to arrange the order of the meetings, and the organization was duly accomplished. When all had taken their seats, Tank Campbell rose very awkwardly, fumbling his hat. It was evident that he had something to say, and all waited in breathless silence.

"I don't need to tell you locos that I hain't in the habit of talking in meetin'! If it war a brandin' corral, then I'd be there with the best of ye, but it hain't, and that settles that. Well now, if I understands this pledge business as I thinks I do, then there ain't much show for some of us. Look at me! I reckon I've made more vows than you could put on that wall, but I've broke every one of them. What's the use? So long as that saloon stands over there I'm a goner, that's the whole facts in the case. I've rode steady years on years, and yet I hain't got no

ranch, nor any cattle. I've been drivin' the other fellow's beef to market when it ought to have been my own. Why, confound it! my saddle even is about gone for repairs, and all because that man Guber keeps a gin mill across the road!" Campbell glared around the room and then went on:

"When I comes to the Junction sayin' to myself all down the road: 'Tank, you fool, you broncho, crazy on loco, stay out of that place. Git a bone in your leg and stand up like a man! I means it all right. But jest about then somebody yells, 'Hello, Tank! they's on you this time; I set 'em up before.' Well, sir, right then and there I feel all my turns slip, and the next I knows away bolts my steer, rope and all. Yes, saddle, cinch, Tank, and the whole shootin'-match, and when I catches up with the procession, why, I find every bean gone and a bill agin' me at Guber's, and after that I gits dunned every time I shows up in the Junction. No, sir! There hain't no show for me as long as that place is sendin' out its smells." Campbell sat down in a shuffle of feet and suppressed laughter from the back seats.

"I have a suggestion," said Baldwin, rising. All eyes were turned toward him. "How would it do to call Guber over and make him a cash offer for his goods—all they are worth?"

"Which would be the last naught on the left-hand side, for they hain't worth nothin'," Campbell interrupted.

Baldwin waited till the rider had expressed himself and then went on: "Offer him all they are worth and then make him sell if he don't want to. I'll stand my part of the proposition."

"Good! Good!" came from different parts of the house, while some demurred.

"I understand he is running his place with no sanction in law. If this is true—and I have no reason to doubt it—he is at the mercy of the officers. But we are all aware that the sheriff of this county is the friend of lawlessness, or the ring of thieves over the range would have been broken up long ago. I simply present this for your consideration."

Several men rose and agreed with the suggestion. Campbell and Painter stood up: "Me and Charlie's the boys to bring him over, all right; you watch us!" Five minutes later they appeared with the owner of the saloon, very red of face, and very angry.

"With your consent, Guide, I'd like to tell my old booze friend here the nature of this here meetin'," said Campbell, pushing the resisting saloonist toward the front. There being no objection, he continued: "You see, Gubie, we have been talkin' the matter over somewhat, and have concluded to tell ye how much we love ye, Gubie, that's it—how much we love ye, and what ye can do to make us love ye more."

"What do you want of me?" growled Guber, glaring around him. "I have customers to serve, so make your business short."

"We will, Gubie, we'll make it short, all right—too short, perhaps. When ye hear the motion of this here meetin' ye may be willin' to stay and argue the case. The fact is, Gubie, there's a feelin' amongst us that if it hadn't been for your joint that boy wouldn't a-been killed 'tother night, and that for considerable reasons you are one extra to the peace and good feelin's of this here valley; so, what we want you to do is to

state the price of your liquids over there, so we can buy 'em, and please do it some time this here present evenin'! See?"

Guber glared at Norton, setting him down as the cause of his trouble, then he broke into a rage. "This is some of your hypocritical business, you bigot, and I'll make you pay for interfering with other men's affairs!"

Norton smiled and remained quiet.

"You's not dealin' with the Guide, Gubie, but with me and the rest of the fellows from whose pockets you have took piles of wages that ought to gone to buy cows with. It's got around to you, and that thief, Monte Ray, and it's a fine pair ye are, too. But git down to it and state your price quick. We're goin' to give you somethin' for the pizen, though we all knows you hain't got no right in law to run the joint."

The saloon keeper started and glanced about, then strode toward the door, but was promptly pushed back to place by Campbell.

"We'll have the price first, Gubie, for sure as we're holdin' this meetin' you've got to leave the valley."

"But I'm not going to leave the valley—understand that?"

"You'll take our little old price, and git, or we'll roll your barrels into the street and knock in their heads, so help us God!" thundered Campbell, catching the flash of a pair of black eyes at the rear. Guber looked about for a friendly expression, but met only very earnest faces.

"What's your dope worth, uncle? A couple of hundred, includin' chairs and lookin' glasses?" Campbell was relentless.

"More than that, ten times!" Guber replied fiercely.

"I reckon I'm some judge of that, myself, and seein' that brown sugar and rain water hain't so very costly, why, it strikes me that two hundred is more'n enough."

"You can't come none of your church tricks on me, I won't stand for it, that's all! My business is lawful, and I will continue in it; and any man who interferes with my rights shall have the law to the full. Get out of my way, I'm going out of here." Again the saloon keeper tried to shoulder his way out, but Campbell's hand closed on his throat, and his voice was shrill with warning as he commanded him back to place.

"You gotta come across, Gubie, that's all there is to it, and we hain't very much time to arrange the papers. As to the price of the dope, why, I'll jest leave that to a vote of the boys, so line up here, all ye who think two hundred's enough for the liquids in this transaction." The crowd rose in a body. "There wasn't a half dozen kept their seats," shouted Campbell, who was enjoying his victory over the man who had ruined him. "With your consent, Guide, we'll jest conform to the general practices and pass the hat." It came back containing the amount agreed upon, a goodly part having been donated by the King.

"How about the house?" asked a rider from the back.

"That's on me," answered Campbell. "I've spent several times the price of that shack over there, besides, I worked out a whisky debt what I run in the tent before Gubie got a house, by puttin' on paint and the rest of it. Yes, gents, I mildly requests that you leave the house to me, and if Mr. Gubie don't object I reckon I'll jest call the bill settled. You see, I have

spent several thousand over his bar and he didn't give me nothin' for that, so it's a draw. Here's your money, Gubie, take it and head out—git me?"

The saloonist began to swear viciously, but was prevented from continuing by Campbell, who gripped the fat neck of the man mercilessly.

"I'll jest act as chairman of this here committee, so some of you amuse Gubie while we proceeds to business," said Campbell, pushing down the aisle toward the door.

Followed by a dozen men, Campbell shuffled into the saloon and addressed the crowd:

"This here most desirable property has changed hands, gents, and the goods has been placed in the care of a receiver—or I reckon you'd say the hands of receivers, 'cause there's several of us. Now, it will be necessary to jest ask ye to move out as we want to do a little fumigatin' in this here present." Those at the bar whirled toward the speaker.

"What the h—l!" hissed Monte Ray, who was one of them.

"Jest cut out that swearin', Monte, see? You and me's mixed before, and I take it I could stand another misunderstandin' without any serious results, so if ye want any of it, why, I'm your huckleberry, that's all. But if ye don't, then git out and do it quick, for as I was sayin', this place has changed hands, and the present inhabitants will be very pleasin' in departin' in pleasant attitudes." Tank well-nigh swamped himself in a mixture of words which swept him beyond his understanding of English. Nevertheless, he rallied and continued: "You there, Mr. Dope-mixer, jest haul off that apron, for you're out of a job. We'll need

it a little later to mop up with. The committee would be mighty well pleased if you'd attend to this matter in the next ten seconds."

"You're crazy, Campbell. You've got them this time, sure. It's gone to your head. Where's Guber?" The bartender looked at the rider with something of fear in his eyes.

"It may be that I can help ye git my meanin' then, so jest step back a little while I convince ye completely." Campbell sent a heavy bottle crashing into the mirror behind the bar. The barkeeper reached for a weapon. Campbell had him before he could raise the hammer.

"It is as Tank says, and you'll have to go." Baldwin stepped forward to confirm the rider's statements. "We have paid Guber for his goods and the place is in our hands. The saloon is a thing of the past in this valley."

The barkeeper threw his apron across the counter with an oath. Monte Ray stood twisting his elegant black mustache with a cold smile. With great ease and contempt he turned and walked out. An hour later he rode away toward the mountains in company with Guber.

"The barrels come first—eh?" Barns, the Miner, was kicking one across the floor toward the front of the building.

"Yes, seein' as that is the particular characterizin' feature of this here institution," Campbell replied.

Others followed with kegs containing greenish liquids. The heads of these were promptly knocked in and the contents allowed to run into the road.

"By the great Jim Cracky! it'll give the whole pike

the snakes," said Campbell, ending up one of the barrels and spilling a quantity of queer material on the ground. "By the Jupiter cats!" he shouted, "look at this, everybody and the dog! Ever see anything like that before?" There were squares of tobacco swelled to many times their natural size, with much rusted iron and other material, making a greenish heap. "There hain't no wonder that men wanted to kill somethin' when filled with that, is there? Well I'll be—" Campbell caught himself. He had won his first victory under the pledge.

When the barrels had been emptied they were rolled to the rear and filled with bottles. The tables were piled in the street and the bar broken with an ax. A can of coal-oil was found and the inflammable material poured over the pile. As a match was applied to it, a shout echoed away to the hill, where two men drew rein and turned in their saddles. When they saw the red leap of the fire both hissed an oath of vengeance, then went on into the clasping night.

As Norton and Barns rode down the street they heard Campbell's voice, which had an exultant ring: "This means a ranch and cows, Katie, dear, besides a better day for Tank Campbell. And think of it, little gal, I started to swear and caught myself, sure as h—l I did—ask Barns if I didn't, and that the first night I signed. What do you think of that? I tell you, Katie, I'll be a man yet, for I mean to quit cussin' and all the rest of it."

Norton did not catch the woman's answer, it was too low, but the rider's happy laugh which followed it told them that it was full of encouragement.

CHAPTER XXI

A FORM OUT OF THE MIST

MARY rode into the gathering twilight. It was early September, and though the days were warm the nights had grown cool.

As she took the trail which led up to her favorite viewpoint in the opening where Norton had found her, the spume of the marshes came to her nostrils.

She moved slowly, permitting Wildwind to take his own gait. In the hollows deer were feeding, and the sound of their light movings came to her ear. She was not afraid of her curious neighbors. In fact, these things suited her exactly.

"How beautiful it all is," she mused. "Nature is a book which only a few can read. The eyes of Mammon are holden to all this. To them the night is a blotch of gloom to be endured, and the flowers and the forest are wonders of which they never dream. Yet the trees have voices the very sweetest: they whisper together like old friends."

In this train of thought Mary passed from glade to glade.

In one place the trail ran close to a waterfall, which dropped with a sigh into a pool. Here she paused and permitted the mist to fall upon her. "This is my bridal and sacrament," she mused, her eyes raised; "I am now wholly devoted to the altars of Vesta." Beyond this was a small glade, out of which some wild creature scurried at her approach.

"That gal will come to grief if she don't quit prowling around nights," old Jed Anderson predicted one morning, after he had seen her galloping homeward through the first dawn. "It won't do, that's all. It was never intended to be that way, and it'll turn out bad, mark my word. Why, last night I heard the cougars screeching up the way she was, but it don't seem to make any difference to her. But there's danger, just the same."

To Mary there was nothing to fear. She had grown accustomed to the shining of eyes and the panting of wolves. As she rode up the trail toward the last divide her reins fell slack and her horse took his own gait. There was a war of emotions in her heart; feelings which she could not interpret. Her thoughts went to other things. The wild fight at the Big Willow—some words of Norton's which had impressed her—their first meeting—the hunt, and his generous wish that she might have the honors of the day. Then she recalled how he looked that night under the Burial Cliffs, and later, when they had found each other in the autumn woods, where the wild vines ran over the ground like tiny streams of blood. All this came to her in a very impersonal way, yet she was conscious of a strange sense of depression, and a sigh broke from her lips.

From such meditations Mary began to analyze her own plans. She would travel—she had always wanted to do that. Things over-seas were calling her. She would breathe the breath of musk-haunted nights, while she listened to the singing of gondoliers. Just then the moon fell on the ring on her left hand. She raised it close to her eyes and looked at it intently, a

troubled expression on her face. There are times when the serious things of life clothe themselves in vagaries, when they sit stolid in the nooks of the soul. Because this is true men make great mistakes, and the hearts of women are given to long bleeding. Suddenly the croon of the night birds seemed like a sound in a dream, and the threnody in the pine-tops more felt than heard.

She shook the mood from her with an effort, entered the glade and rode to the spot where Norton had come to her months before. This had been a favorite place for him to go, he had told her so. She wondered if she liked it better because of that? Then she bit her lip with a feeling of anger at the persistent thought which haunted her. She had no right to think of him—of anybody. After a few weeks or months she would be far away, her life changed. Though she could never forget the mountains and the Valley of the Silver Bow, yet it would be wonderful to go from ruin to ruin; to walk where those had been who made history. Crumbling towers and tottering walls awaited her. Old castles, where the knightly and the beautiful mingled in the mirth of a crude age were to be visited, and she told herself that she was anxious to go. Then her mind came back to the Mountain Land, and all she would be leaving forever, and in spite of her efforts to keep them back, tears splashed down her cheeks.

A sound startled her. She turned quickly to find a man at her stirrup, and another grasping her bridle rein. Quick as thought her hand went toward the holster at her saddle-horn, but her wrist was promptly grasped by one of the men.

"You go with us, so don't make any trouble, or it

will be the worse for you. Here, get off." The man made as if to help her, but Mary kindled with a blaze of determination.

"Back, villain! I will not!" she cried, slashing the man's face with her riding whip, and sending a second cut to Wildwind's flank. The horse lunged madly, but the man was a giant, and forced the brute back on his haunches. At the same instant Mary felt herself lifted from the saddle.

"Let me go!" she demanded, struggling desperately.

The men laughed. "Let you go? Hardly! We have waited too long to get you for that. O, no, we've got you, so just come along without any bother, will you? It will be better for you if you do. Understand?"

"Who are you and what do you mean by this?" she questioned, still trying to liberate herself.

"Never mind. That will be clear enough to you later. You can guess that we have good reasons for turning this trick or we wouldn't turn it. Come along like a good girl, for we don't want to harm you, only you must do what we tell you, and you will be all right—otherwise it might be different."

"My father and friends will move heaven and earth to find me, and it will be a bad day for you when they do." Mary had spoken boldly, though her heart felt little of the courage of her words. She realized the helplessness of her condition. She was half conscious in this moment of fear and dread that her mind went out to Norton and Baldwin. With a chill at her heart she realized that she did not expect DuMont to assist her at such a time.

"We have planned for all that. Let them look;

they could track a snake over a rock as easily as they could follow us. And if they did find us, we could stand off a thousand. Here, get between us and move on—we have no time to lose."

Mary broke away and bounded toward the rim of the forest. But she had not gone a dozen paces before a brutal hand grasped her shoulder and she was brought to an abrupt stop.

"Give me the rope, Bill; we'll have to tie her," growled the man. The cord was looped about her waist, and Mary was jerked forward. There was no use resisting, and she walked on in silence. With a courage born of the Mountain Land she accepted her condition, and instead of giving up to despair began to plan, not only to leave a clearly defined trail, but to escape at the first opportunity. All of this had been guarded against by her captors, for they took every precaution, both in watching her and in going over those places where the least sign of their passage would be left.

In spite of this, Mary began playing her part. Many times she fell where there was no reason for it, and the time she took in regaining her feet caused the men to swear viciously. Wherever possible, she turned over small chunks of wood. Those who might follow would understand. At the intersection of two trails she cried for help. But there was no answer. One of the men strode toward her with an oath: "I'll strangle you if you do that again. Understand?"

Turning, the men hurried into the forest, dragging the resisting girl. Her spirit rose and she defied them, and in every possible way made it difficult for them to proceed. In this manner they went on. Through

brawling streams; along dizzy cliffs, where the men took firmer hold of the rope, lest she cast herself down. Sometimes their way led through thickets of mountain cherry and laurel where they were compelled to carry her. At other times they were forced to creep across deep cañons on fallen trees, through open pine woods, where the needles made a hard bed into which their feet would not sink. With scant ceremony they splashed through marshes, where the ground was spumy and treacherous. Hour after hour the men forced her forward in feverish haste. Down winding ridges; under splintered rocks, till Mary grew too weary to go farther and they were compelled to rest. The time spent in this manner was very brief, however, and the ache had not gone out of her swollen ankles before they were up and trudging forward.

For what Mary guessed was an hour they had been going downhill. The heights became less abrupt and the country more open. The sound of water roaring among rocks reached her, and turning a point they came to the banks of a large stream. In other lands it would have been dignified with the name of a river, but in the mountain country it was referred to merely as a "fork." Deep forests came down to its edge, while beyond, a lofty range loomed against the sky.

Pausing to lift the resisting girl to their shoulders, the men waded in. The channel was strewn with bowlders and the current was swift, but after ten minutes of battle with the white fury they came out where the bank had an easy slope, and without pausing for rest plunged at once into the depths of the wood.

As they came from the water, Mary dropped her

handkerchief and a bit of lace torn from her sleeve, in an open space where anyone following the bank would not fail to find them. A backward glance showed her that they lay white and plain, and that they could be seen from the opposite shore.

The moon had set, and the coming dawn began to light up the east with slender, erubescent spears. There was a greenish tinge to the shadows, with just the faintest outline of the tops of the hemlocks visible. Through this materializing mass the men hurried as fast as the weary girl could travel. Her feet ached and her limbs were trembling from exertion.

Finally the ground began to rise, and fragments of rock littered the slopes. Hollows full of juniper wound up the base of the mountain, where dense thickets of snow-stunted aspens and bitter cherry clogged the way. Close under the cliffs, where the trees made a gloomy archway, the men lifted the branches, revealing a narrow path. It was the water trail of the wild goats which lived in the cliffs above.

After what seemed to Mary an age of winding and doubling among titanic rocks and fallen trees she found herself at a narrow passage leading back into the mountain. The men entered, giving a low signal which was answered out of the darkness. In the murk ahead a slender ray of light wavered across the wall and held nebulously. Then, there was a greater radiance, also more room, for they were entering a large chamber at the end of the passageway. Mary shuddered with fear as forms rose up and approached them like wraiths. Her hand went to her bosom. She had made the most of her chance while crossing the stream on the shoulders of the men, and the belt of

one was lighter for that. She knew what she would do if it came to the worst; there was that way out of it all.

"Got her, I see," said one, chuckling with satisfaction.

"Yes, but we're fagged. Had to drag and carry the wench all the way. Get us something to eat, will you? Nothing since noon yesterday, understand. Possibly the young lady might enjoy a bite too." But Mary felt no need of food, and sank wearily upon a slab of rock. A great fear tugged at her heart. She had watched for an opportunity to slip from the cave, but a tall form stood close beside the opening, making it impossible. One of them approached her:

"Bad business, this running around nights sparking the man in the moon, don't you think? If you had been at home, where all good girls ought to be at such hours, you wouldn't be here. See?"

In the half light Mary could make out the flash of white teeth and the dark mustache, which the man was stroking with soft fingers from long habit. He moved one of the lanterns closer to where she sat. "I just want to take another look at you, for you understand I have seen you quite often, though I suppose my face is rather new to you. I feared the trip here might cut you down somewhat, but I am glad to note that you are still somewhat above the average for looks. If the old man is half as fond of you as I expect to be—as I am now, in fact—he will come along with the price all right. Eh, fellows?" The last words were addressed to the men at the other side of the cave.

"Not a doubt of that, Ray," came the answer.

The man's words brought revelation. It was all

clear in an instant. She had been kidnaped in order that her father might be forced to secure her release with a large sum of money. The knowledge of the plot steadied her on the instant.

"You have never been honored with a personal acquaintance with me, Miss Morrison, but I have often watched you riding past my place of business, and was greatly impressed with your good looks. Really, you seem to have moon-wonder in your face and opal fire in your eyes. There is that about you which reminds me of the pure seeming of flowers. I am not surprised that there are many over in the valley who would be delighted to bask in the light of your smiles. But I flatter myself that you may come to see charms in me that are not to be despised. I assure you that other women have. Really, Miss Morrison, am I not possessed of rather a striking personality?"

"I know you for a murderer and a brigand, Monte Ray; know you as I do the carcass in the field below the ford. Insulter of women and common thief, stand back from me; your presence is a pollution." Mary's eyes flashed.

The gambler smiled complacently, but the glitter in his eyes was hard. "You have certainly been misinformed regarding me, Miss Morrison, for I assure you I consider myself quite a gentleman—after the old stamp, of course. It is a fact that I have had several women in love with me, and seeing that the men who brought you here are asleep, and the rest are scattered about the passageways, we might have a friendly little chat. Really, I would be delighted with a kiss. I almost dare believe that your lips are virgin. Am I mistaken?" The gambler stooped sud-

denly till his face came close to hers. With a cry, Mary sprang back.

"Villain! Do not touch me!" she cried, pale with fear and anger.

The man at the entrance glided swiftly across the cave and thrust the gambler back. "None of that, Ray; have you forgotten the agreement?"

"Mind your business, Wilkes. This is my deal. If you get your pay that is all you need be concerned about. Don't come along with any of your churchy ideas. I'll see to this matter, and the other chap as well. He thinks he can work Monte Ray, but I'll show him that he is mistaken. Bah! I'll teach him tricks in this line. A few thousand dollars and the girl—that's my share. Understand?" The gambler turned to Mary: "Come now, I'm waiting for that kiss." He moved as if to put his hands upon her, but the fingers of the other closed on his throat. The gambler recoiled instantly.

"I tell you to let her alone. If you touch her with your slimy hands I'll kill you like a rat. Get me?"

"Suppose I insist on having my way; then what?" The smile under the black mustache was cold and dangerous.

"I'll shoot you, that's all. If you doubt it, try me!"

Suddenly the gambler relaxed. It was bad policy just then to have trouble among the men. "Pass it on, Wilkes, I was joking. The wench is safe enough with me. Remember, the money has not come yet, and I don't want any trouble. Some time I'll have a word with you. Don't forget that I have a good memory."

"Keep your part of the contract and there will be no trouble. I don't stand for the abuse of a defense-

less woman, low as I am. Get over where you belong." The gambler obeyed with a debonair wave of his hand.

Mary turned to her protector:

"I greatly appreciate this. You are not all bad." The man did not reply, but went back to his place at the opening. Mary sank down on the stone, and with her head on her arm tried to think and get what rest she could.

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH THE VALLEY IS TROUBLED

NORTON came out into the crisp September air, and stood taking deep breaths of the element. For some time he remained looking across the wide meadow-lands to where the banked cottonwoods began to show golden in the autumn sunshine.

The sound of horses' feet attracted his attention, and he turned as Baldwin and King Morrison came dashing up. Both men dismounted without speaking. It was evident that something out of the ordinary had happened.

"What is it, Mr. Morrison?" Norton asked, walking to where the old man stood with heaving chest.

"It's another blow at King Morrison, that's all. I don't care for the money, but if they harm a hair of her head I'll burn that robber's roost with fire!"

Norton's heart cramped. "Tell me what is wrong," he demanded, the old look coming to his eyes.

"Read that. I found it under the door this morning, and her horse standing at the gate."

Norton took the paper and read what caused him to breathe hard. Mary had been spirited away, and would be kept beyond reach till a round twenty thousand should be deposited at a certain place. If the demand was not complied with, the girl was to be made the property of her captors. Norton reread the paper and gave it back.

"When did this happen?" he asked, very quietly.

"Last night. You know she was great for roaming about the hills, and somewhere on the trails they have found her alone. I heard her horse running down the road early this morning, but thought nothing of it till she did not come in. Then I got up and found this. After that, I got Baldwin and came here. What shall we do?" The pleading in the old man's voice moved Norton deeply.

"Find her, of course!" Norton's eyes were full of fire.

"We will do just that, and here's my hand and life on it!" Baldwin broke out impulsively.

The men clasped hands and their eyes met.

Then the old ranchman spoke up: "It's like this, Guide; you have been telling us that God hears when we talk to him. Is that right?" Norton nodded. "Now, I have never been just clear on this matter, but you seem to be, and if you are, I wish you would get him interested in this case if you can, because I—I—need help bad!"

"I believe he will aid us." Norton felt prompted to speak with authority on the point.

"Do you believe he will protect her from their dirty hands?"

"Yes."

"And you feel that he will be with us and help us find her?"

Norton had no time to discuss those things connected with the power of choice which baffle even the Divine wishes, but his answer was full of courage.

"I do!" he replied, firmly.

"Then, sir, I want you to ask that my child may

be given back to me just as she was when I last saw her. Will you?"

"I will. But, first a question, Mr. Morrison. Suppose God should do this. What then? The same old life of bitterness and get-even?"

The King stood silent for some time. He had not thought of that side of it. He was no coward, however, and the position he saw himself in appealed to his sense of fair play. Norton waited.

"I will be thankful forever?"

"And make that gratitude known?"

"I feel I will, Guide."

"Then we will work it out on those lines." The three men stood close together while Norton framed a few sentences which covered the field of their wishes. It was a strange sight that—the spilling sunshine on the bowed heads, and the one uplifted face. When it was over the eyes of the old ranchman were dim, and Baldwin did not look at either of his companions.

After a minute's absence Norton returned leading Dan. "Now for the trail and any sacrifice which her rescue may demand," he said, firmly.

Then the King did a very unexpected thing: he threw his arm out and drew Norton to him, at the same time his hand felt for Baldwin's. The demonstration was very brief, and could never be repeated. The law of a man's nature prevented that, but the gate had been opened once, and that which was seen and felt gave a true estimate of the old man's inner self.

A few minutes were spent in filling saddle-bags with food and strapping on holsters. The Miner, who appeared at that moment, abandoned all other plans and

joined the three in the search. There was battle in the old prospector's face when he heard the story, and the way in which he transferred his revolver from the saddle-horn to his hip indicated his frame of mind. The next minute the four men were sweeping down the valley at a tearing gallop.

"The horse came from the cañon to the right, as near as I can tell. I tracked him, that is, I thought it was the right trail, in the damp dust, and the prints led right up to the mountain," said the King, as they came to the end of the lane beyond the Junction.

Norton was thinking fast. He knew that the open place at the pass was one of Mary's favorite haunts.

"I have been thinking of what I overheard that night across the range," Norton said to Baldwin. "They have been working this thing up for months and waiting their chance. When the opportunity presented itself they were ready. I remember they spoke of a cave, and that is just where she has been taken—what more natural? We must find it, that's all!"

The tracks showed that the horse had not kept to the trail in his flight down the mountain, but had entered the cañon through the thickets on the side of the hill; because of this it was hard to follow the way the animal had come.

At this point Richard DuMont joined them. He had returned to the Silver Bow a few weeks before, crossing the range on horseback. Riding up in great haste, he declared that a rider had discovered the trail in another direction and that they were on the wrong scent. He urged the King to pay the ransom. What was any amount of money compared to Mary's safety? The ranchman hesitated for an instant. He

was certain that the girl's fate would be deplorable beyond description if the demand of the kidnapers was not acceded to. The King flared hot at the insinuation.

"DuMont is trying to dictate to Morrison, and he ought to know that he can't do that. If that fellow is as rich as he pretends, why don't he pay the ransom?" Baldwin said to Norton, when they were alone for a minute. The eyes of the two men met, but they said nothing.

"There is not the best of feeling between them. The King has refused to deed him anything in the event of the marriage. I don't think Mary fully understands the old man's feelings in the matter. He wants her to have whatever she wishes; but he has talked to me a little in regard to this matter. But if DuMont is rich he won't need any of the old man's property." Baldwin ceased and looked intently at the ground for a minute. "To tell you the truth, Guide, I'd about as soon see Mary in the hands of bandits as going off with that man's name."

"Miss Morrison does not know him, for he is all gallantry and kindness, and his manner has deceived her. It is not in her generous heart to believe evil of anyone. Perfectly sincere herself, she trusts others; but should the mask ever come off, I know what his fate would be. I have seen under it—he is bad, all bad! But we have nothing to do with that. We must save her at all cost. Somewhere she is waiting for us to find her!"

The King led their horses while Norton and Baldwin plunged through thickets of snow brush and stooling laurel, following the trail of the horse sometimes

by the marks of his shoes on the green bark. DuMont expressed great disgust, insisting that they were wasting their time, and that the King should deposit the amount asked by the bandits. The scathing rebukes of the ranchman seemed to have no power to check his demands on this line.

The King was perplexed. Should he put the money in the place designated or not? He drew Norton and Baldwin aside and asked their opinion.

"I think I would not pay the money, Mr. Morrison; at least not right now. I am quite sure the plan is to get both your money and your daughter. I have certain reasons for believing this. If I am right, then she will be safer with the financial end of it unsettled, for they will hold her, trying to get that through; whereas, in the other event, they would quit the mountains by routes we would not be able to follow. If you should leave the money at the place stated, then what? Silence, with plenty of time to get away. Remember that Guber and Monte Ray are at large. But you must not forget what we asked for this morning. Hold steady. Meantime we will work!"

The old man's face brightened. "I will do it," he replied, decidedly. "And now about the trail—do you think we are on the right track?"

"There is not a doubt of it; don't let anyone make you think anything else. I'd know Wildwind's tracks anywhere, and this is where he came down the mountain." Baldwin spoke decidedly.

"But DuMont, who ought to be interested, declares that a lead has been found across the valley—I don't know."

"It might be well for you to return and make sure

of that, while we three keep to this side," said Norton, who realized the conflicting emotions in the ranchman's mind.

To this the King agreed, and he returned with DuMont, while the others pushed on up the mountain, paying not the slightest heed to DuMont's admonition bawled after them to turn back if they wished to be of any real service in the hunt.

"I have been told that when a man is lost he should go in the way he thinks is wrong, and that will be about the proper direction. Well, I feel like going for Mary in the very direction that rascal says she is not. See?" Baldwin's voice trailed off suspiciously, while he eyed his companions in a way that said more than words.

Norton agreed with his friend by a look, but said nothing. Pushing forward, he lunged over fallen trees and dead growth, forcing Dan through places where the brute was compelled to strain every nerve to make a passage. At last the trail was hopelessly lost. A consultation was held. The horse had left the path higher up; that seemed certain. This proved to be true, for they found the animal had bolted into the brush not far from the spot where Mary and Norton had looked down into the valley.

From this point on the tracks were plain. The men hurried forward, Norton indicating that they were to follow him. Dismounting in the open he showed them the clear marks of a man's foot in the damp earth, and the deep prints of a horse's hoofs, made while the animal was struggling. It was all plain in a minute. From this spot the horse had bolted down the mountain, after Mary had been taken from the

saddle. There were the marks of her shoes, with her riding-whip lying in the grass.

Further investigation showed that the men were on foot, and the three abandoned their horses. That signified much; the kidnapers were going where horses could not, and the distance would not be very great. Removing their saddles and bridles they hid them in a thicket of young firs; then the horses were given a start down the trail. The blankets were hastily rolled into small packs containing a third of the food supply, and each man fastened one upon his shoulders, then went forward swiftly.

Noon found them gliding through the listening forest. They were now in the very heart of the wilderness. Trails of elk caught the land in a net, and grouse thundered from the cherry thickets.

"That gal is sure a smart one, for she has turned over all these chunks and rocks so we could follow her. It would have taken them thieves all their time to put them back as they was," the Miner ejaculated enthusiastically.

"She knew we would be on her trail, and find her if it takes the rest of our lives," said Baldwin with spirit.

Norton caught the tone, but made no reply; nor did he show the dull pain which passed into his heart at that moment.

Hour after hour they swept on; down winding ridges, along white streams quarreling with their bowlders; through silent forests where the birds were hushed. Late in the day they paused for rest. Three times they had lost the trail, and it had taken as many hours to find it again. When it led through intermi-

nable thickets of chaparral they had crept forward at a snail's pace, so that the distance covered by Mary and her captors from midnight to dawn, her friends had not been able to do by half in the same length of time.

Slowly the sun dropped down the west. The long shadows splashed out from the hills; and then the twilight came, tender as a farewell kiss. Later, the darkness found them in a dense wood with the trail lost.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN WHICH THERE IS AN ENCOUNTER

MORNING was still on the hills when the three men began the search for the lost trail. They found it in a low place where a chunk had been turned over and some stones moved out of their damp beds by the girl. After that it led through cypress groves and thickets of sprawling cedar, where the shadows were dim and mystery was over all.

Once they were deceived and lost an hour following the traces of a bear which had gone through a patch of wild cabbage searching for food. The strain on the eyes proved to be very severe and they rested each other in finding the footprints. At last the work became easier, for the kidnapers had taken less caution, and the pursuers made better time. Late in the afternoon they came to the stream where Mary had dropped her handkerchief. Here they paused for a moment of council.

"It stands to reason they would carry her over, don't it? Well, that bein' so they would make for an easy place to git out, and I'll wager a clean-up of high-grade dirt that the slopin' bank over there is where they left the water." Before he ceased speaking the Miner was breasting the current, his companions close beside him.

As one man they sprang toward the white object as they reached the land, but Norton was the first to grasp it.

"It is her handkerchief; she has dropped it here knowing we would skirt the stream looking for the place where they crossed!" he said breathlessly. For a moment he held the bit of linen reverently. Her hand had touched it. There was still a faint odor of violets coming from it, and the two M's worked in the corner seemed to emphasize the call to each one of them to help her.

"What do you think now?" Baldwin asked.

"That she is somewhere in one of the caves of that range beyond the woods. They could not have gone much farther in the time they had to make this distance. We must go forward very cautiously from this on."

"It will be hard to find, for it's getting dark now and it's more than a mile to the edge of the timber."

"Lead out, men," broke in the Miner, who had insisted on doing more than his share of the trailing.

"Keep close and make no sound," said Norton, going to the front.

It was possible to follow the trail only by the dark spots which showed where the girl had turned over the leaves, or had removed chunks of wood from their places. Many times Norton put his hand into his pocket to touch the bit of cloth with its tiny rim of lace. Like most of the deeper things of the soul, he could not analyze this desire.

At the farther side of the wood they entered a wilderness of aspen thickets. It became impossible to follow the trail, and there was nothing to do but wait till the moon rose. That would not be long, for already a line of silver capped the upper peaks.

Turning aside, they crept under a low-branching

evergreen at the edge of the glade with the bunch grass tall about it.

Stretched at full length, Norton suddenly realized that he was in need of a rest. The anxiety of the search had been more than the physical features of it. A storm of worry had raged in him. Even now he was feverishly restless to be going. Perhaps as he was thus lying still she was listening for the sounds that would tell her that her friends had come. He wondered if she depended on him to help her. That would be worth everything. Norton parted the branches above his head and peered out at the swimming stars. How far away they seemed, and how meaningless! He could see nothing in their impersonal shining just then but a cold disinterestedness. A light wind went gypsying through the aspen glade, where the spice of mint lay heavy on the autumn air.

After five minutes of looking at the white worlds, Norton suddenly grew tense, for the sound of steps reached his ears. Then a low whistle was answered immediately from below. Steps were heard approaching from the opposite direction, and two forms appeared a smudge in the dusk.

"Right on time. What's the news?"

"Nothing definite yet. The old dog hasn't coughed up. Hear that fanatic sky-croaker has advised him not to pay the money."

"What's the other fellow doing to put it through?"

"All he can; and I believe if we can keep them off the trail for a few days it will go."

"He'll come across all right, when he finds he can't get her back any other way."

"He may not get her back if he does. Get me, pal?"

"None of that. You know where I stand. But did you do anything to hurry matters up?"

"Arranged to leave another note. It demands quick action, and if he don't come along I'll even up with the whole gang by taking the girl and fading away. I'd rather have her than the money, anyway. How is she?"

"Seems about as well pleased as a caged cougar. Laid Scaggs out with a piece of granite when he kept her from escaping. She's got the courage all right. But about the other part: You remember we agreed to return her if the money didn't come, and I plan to see that it is done. Besides, you will have to settle with the other fellow if you try that."

"O, he can go hang! What do I care for him? The girl suits me, and I'm going to have her, so don't let that concern you, for I'll be responsible. I have taken a hand in this game and I'll play it to the limit. The rest of you can fade if it falls through, and I'll take care of her."

"But that's just what you won't do," the other replied, doggedly. "Money or no money, the girl goes back to the valley, don't forget that."

"I warn you, don't get in my way!" the words came with a hiss.

"You must not plan on that, Ray, for I won't let you do it."

"What will you do, curse you?"

"I'll try and find some way to keep you from doing it."

"If you get in my way, I'll kill you. Understand?"

"Make your threats to those who can be scared by them, Ray. Meantime, remember I will do as I say."

THERE IS AN ENCOUNTER

"Interfere with my plans and I will send a bullet into your heart!"

"Bah! I care nothing for your bluster, Ray—save your breath. I don't mind a little dirty work when it means a few thousand; but I haven't got to where I'd let a man like you go off with such a girl. No, sir! Better forget that right now."

The gambler placed his hand on his hip in such a way that the handle of his revolver was within easy reach, and stood glaring at the man who had defied him. "I have killed men before now for less than that, do you know it?"

"Possibly. But I know something of gun play, myself, when it comes to that, and I repeat: you shall not do this, simply because I'll not let you. Get me?"

An oath sizzled from the gambler's lips. "I have orders to kill anyone who weakens or dares to meddle with the plans of the gang, and I'll do it!"

"You have such orders?"

"You heard me say so."

"Who gave you such instructions?"

"The man who planned this thing."

"Then I suppose I'll have to kill him, too."

"As you please about that. It would make it easier for me. Meantime, don't get in my way. I've concluded to turn a little trick of my own and beat him at his own game." The man laughed in a menacing way.

"You plan to slip from the country and take the girl with you; is that it?"

"Exactly. She is in my power. Why should she not stay there? God! It was a pretty trick of fate to put her under my wing."

"When do you plan to carry this out?"

"Right off—now. The thing has got hold of me." The gambler turned, but the other stepped in front of him.

"No you don't! You die right here or declare that off." The answer to this was a lightning-like movement of both men and two reports which crashed into the cliffs the thousandth part of a second apart. But that fraction was enough for the gambler to drop his enemy into the grass.

"So you will interfere with me, will you? Ah, my friend, no man ever did that and continued to live." The gambler stooped and peered intently at the red spot on the other's temple. "Out of the way for good. Fool! He should have minded his own business." Straightening up, the man listened intently, but there was only the moaning of the night winds through the pines, and the flutter of aspen leaves. Turning, he glided into the denser dusk between rows of hemlocks. The place where he passed from sight was marked by three pairs of keen eyes.

Instantly they prepared to follow. As they passed the body of the man a groan caused them to stop. There was life in the shape, that was evident. Dropping on his knees, Norton found the pulse quite normal, and the breath regular, though faint.

"He is not hurt much. The wound is only a scratch. If one of you will bring some water—"

The Miner hurried away and returned with some in his hat which he splashed in the man's face. Slowly his eyes opened and he stared from one to the other of those above him.

THERE IS AN ENCOUNTER

"He shot me. He's lightning with a gun," he muttered vacantly.

"Yes, and we'll finish the job if you don't instantly lead us to the place where the girl is hidden," said Baldwin, bringing the man to his feet with a jerk which seemed to restore his scattered wits.

"I will do it with one provision."

"What is that?"

"You heard what was said between us?"

"Yes."

"Then you know he shot me because I defended her?"

"We do."

"Will you grant me my request?"

"You haven't stated it yet. Do it instantly, for we have no time to lose."

"It's this. I'll take you to the mouth of the cave, and then you let me off, for I want to kill them both. Is it a go?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"You certainly know the man who shot me?"

"Monte Ray?"

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"That I won't tell you. Come on, I'll take you to the girl."

Norton stopped the man for another word. "Take us to the cave and you may go. But remember your life is in our hands, and one false move will forfeit it. Do you understand?"

"I do."

"Then be quick, for she will not be safe when that devil gits where she is." The Miner thrust the man

forward as he spoke, and the four hurried up the mountain.

Over them the night wind sighed in the trees, and beyond the stars looked very white and still. Norton felt a dead ache at his heart. Fear, dragonish and unendurable, tortured him. Beads of sweat formed and dropped from his temples. What if they should be too late after all? In low words full of hard levels he urged his companions forward. They were now in a small trail which wound about among great bowlders and stunt pines. Suddenly the bandit began to go more cautiously, pausing often to listen, then creeping forward lithe as a cat. All were now in crouching positions, and in this manner they moved a foot at a time. In the shelter of a great cliff which had rolled down, the man paused and pointed to where a stunted cedar grew in a crevice.

"The cave is back of that tree. A narrow passage leads in about sixty feet to a large chamber. Remember, seven armed men will be there to receive you, so do your work quick and trust to luck."

"Give me your gun," demanded the Miner.

"I'll leave it for ye under the tree; when we git inside ye can git it and do what you please—if that devil comes out."

Ten feet in the passage Barns turned and saw the man take up the weapon and crouch under the branches of the tree. Inch by inch the three men crept forward, weapons in hands, desperate. There were fearful odds against them, but they did not hesitate. Dense darkness shrouded them, and the soft dust in the opening kept their feet from making any sound. The reflection of a lantern shot across the end of the passage

and the sound of voices came to their ears. Some one had begun a drinking song, which might indicate impatience with conditions or satisfaction with some sudden turn of affairs. A guttural laugh followed its close. A form passing forth and back before the opening told them that the way was guarded.

The spies had now reached a point where a sudden spring would put them in the cave. They prepared themselves. In that tense moment, when each one took the slack in his nerves, the voice of Mary Morrison came to them full of fear, yet steady and repellent, and with it a low "Now" passed between the three men. Like a whirlwind they leaped into the chamber.

The guard sprang forward and received a blow in the neck which felled him. Then came the crash of revolvers and tubes of pink fire, which split the half darkness. As they entered, Norton glimpsed the form of the girl swaying toward him, and heard her cry of joy. With his body shielding her he fought on till the chambers in his Colt's were empty. The lantern fell from its shelf and went out, but a torch flared up, making the cave like day. A man lurched against him, and Norton saw a knife lifted ready to hiss into his heart. The empty revolver in his hand crashed against the arm which poised the weapon, sending the dirk across the cave.

"I'll have her, curse you!" hissed the gambler, trying to tear the girl from Norton's grasp.

"Over my dead body, Monte Ray, remember." The words accompanied a blow which dropped the outlaw in a wilted heap. Then half lifting the girl, Norton pressed back against the wall where he filled

the chambers of his Colt's. At that moment he saw Baldwin doing the same. Only part of the bandits remained in the cave, but the firing began again, and in the greater light more fatal work was done. A man pitched forward in a heap, while another reeled toward the passage.

Baldwin staggered back as a bullet struck the wall at his ear, filling his face with bits of stone. The gambler rose and fired point blank at Norton, who, forced to desperate measures, returned it, and the man staggered slightly, breathed a deep curse and lurched toward the opening. A minute later a single shot echoed along the walls, then all was still. The fight was over, and glancing about, Norton saw that Baldwin and the Miner were on their feet, though there was a burning in his own side which told him that he had not escaped injury.

"Thank God, you are safe!" Norton ejaculated fervently.

"And a thousand times over let me add my gratitude to yours. How can I ever repay you brave men for what you have done for me?" Mary sank down on a fragment of granite and gave way to tears.

"It's a straight answer to prayer, that's all there is to it," put in the Miner. "Why, stretch my pelt, but it's all come out about as I wanted it. And think of it! not one of us dead after havin' fifty shots fired at us. Got some scratches and plenty of holes in our clothes, but nothin' serious, and the blessed little gal all safe and sound, with the villain done for out at the end of the passage."

"I suppose we should get out of this, Guide, for there might be more of the gang about, and one fight

like this is enough for one night. How is it, Mary? Can you walk?" Baldwin turned to the girl as he put the question, and Norton thought he detected a slight mellowing of his voice.

"Yes, yes; I want to get out of this place. O, what horror I have known here!" She glanced about as if expecting to see her enemies near.

"See that your weapons are in prime condition, and be ready," Norton admonished, setting the example by reloading his revolver.

"You are the bravest of the brave, all of you. My heart overflows with gratitude toward each one. Nobler men never went to the aid of woman! O, my unthinkable fate had you not found me when you did!"

As they left the passage, Norton felt the pain in his side increase. Putting his hand inside his shirt, he brought it out wet with blood. As best he could he examined the wound. It was enough to be very painful, and would keep him from his work for a time. At the end of the passage they came upon the body of a man lying face downward on the rocks.

"That's one of them, and I'll get the other some day, that is—" The bandit stepped from the shadow of the tree and stood looking at the startled face of Mary Morrison.

At sight of him she turned to her companions: "This man defended me; he was a gentleman; show him kindness."

"We know that; we have met him before—tonight," said Baldwin, moving toward the limp shape. "Who is this fellow you have killed?"

"Monte Ray, the man who tried to kill me. He's dead enough."

Baldwin turned the body over. The face still held the evil snarl natural to it, and tiny red streams trickled from both temples.

"He must have been wounded in the fight, for he limped as he came down the passage."

"Look and see how serious his wound was," Norton whispered to Baldwin, who gave his companion an understanding look and proceeded to do so.

"It was not fatal, Guide. There needn't be any worry in your mind over it. He would have survived it all right."

"I am glad!" Norton replied gratefully.

"Leave him to me and the wolves. We will see that he gets the burial suited to such a crime-devil," said the bandit, smarting from his wound. The next instant the body went crashing down the cliff into a thicket of firs a hundred feet below, the dull impact coming up to the silent listeners above.

Following the path, the group made their way down the mountain. Their progress was quite slow, for lack of sleep and food had rendered Mary almost incapable of traveling. The Miner, seeing her condition, hastened to her side:

"Think I'll jest carry ye for a while, Miss Morrison, exactly as your dad would do, so jest look at it the same way, for I see ye are about all in." Without further ceremony, the Miner lifted the girl to his shoulder as if she had been a feather. "There now, jest be quiet and we'll be gettin' on, for we don't want to lose any time."

Mary found it very grateful to rest while the man carried her as if she had been a pack of the trail or a haunch of venison. For an hour they passed down

through the winding aspen glades and on into the forest, where the moon dripped through the laced branches into liquid silver pools. At last they reached the stream where they decided to take time to prepare food, and rest.

What remained in the packs was divided among them, all seeing that the hungry girl received a double portion. Then a booth of fir branches was made and she was compelled to rest. Almost instantly her steady breathing told the men that she was asleep, nor did she wake till morning.

Norton said nothing of his wound, bathing it often during the night, for it became very feverish and painful. By morning the crusted clothing over the place became a torture. He had lost enough blood to weaken him considerably, and the paleness of his face attracted the attention of his companions. Mary came to his side quickly.

"You are wounded; I see the blood. Why did you not tell us? Think of it! the rest of us sleeping the night away, while you were suffering so much, and all for me—that is, on my account." Mary felt very tender toward this man just then, and very grateful. More and more he challenged her admiration, and she looked at him with eyes which saw less darkly than before.

"It is only a scratch," he answered smiling.

Baldwin and the Miner made a hasty examination, the latter chiding him for his silence, and the former holding his hand with a grip of sympathy and understanding.

"It means that you won't ride the trails for some time, Guide," said the Miner decisively, going for water.

"It is nothing; I am sure it will soon heal," Norton persisted, trying to prevent the trembling of his limbs and to shake off the faintness which had come over him.

"To think I have led you all into this danger and suffering by my carelessness! You told me there was reason to be afraid, but I could not realize it. Can you ever forgive me?"

"It was a plot of long standing, and they would have found some means of getting possession of you, so don't feel bad about it," said Norton, trying. to relieve the sense of guilt which her candid nature was all too free to admit. "My wounds will soon heal, and I will be on the trails again. Really, I am hungry. Is not that a good sign?"

"I saw a deer slip into that thicket over there when I went for water, so jest wait a minute and I'll try and git him, for he looked fat." The Miner vanished in the laurel meshes which skirted the camp and a little later they heard the report of his revolver, and were not surprised when he returned to see the carcass of the animal across his shoulder.

"You git a fire goin' and have things ready and I'll jest take a run up to the cave and git what I can find. Those chaps must have had plenty of grub and somethin' to cook it in, too. Oh, don't worry about me. I'll take care of myself," he added, seeing the look in Norton's face. "Those fellows have cleared out for good and all, that's a sure thing, and they'll never plan that trick again." The Miner swung away through the forest, and in an incredibly short time returned well laden with provisions and cooking utensils.

"Nary a dead man up there. They all got out.

Guess the work was only scratches, and that suits me pretty well. How is it with the rest of ye?"

"No one wants blood on his hands," Norton agreed.

As soon as all had eaten, Baldwin and the Miner went to work to make the wounded man comfortable. But in spite of their best efforts he suffered much pain. Fever set in, accompanied by spells of delirium, in which he would go through the scene in the cave and the struggle to keep the trail. Mary made no effort to keep back the tears which forced themselves over her lashes. While the men arranged the camp she sat by Norton and changed the cold packs on his forehead.

"We ought to bind up his wound," said Baldwin, diving into Norton's pockets to see if he could find something that would do. He brought out the handkerchief and bit of lace; both were saturated with blood.

"This is yours, Mary. We found it where you dropped it."

"And I want it!" she replied with emotion, the sight of the deep stain on the linen affecting her strangely.

It was agreed that Baldwin should return to the valley and bring means to get Norton back. Accordingly, he plunged into the wilderness, heading straight over the mountains.

In his delirium Norton wandered much. Sometimes he was speaking to his horse on the long trails. Again, he was in the cabins of the miners, or the tunnels talking to men who leaned on their picks, like begrimed fiends in the glare of hat-lights, listening to him. Again, he fancied he was riding through the moonlight, where the glades were open, and the low winds came soft from the utter place. Brokenly he com-

plained of weariness, or loneliness. Sometimes he spoke the name of God, but even in delirium with reverence. Once he used her name, as though he might have done so often, for he lingered over it a little. But what followed she could not arrange intelligently, for it contained something of matters which were new to her.

Mary had refused to let the Miner relieve her, declaring that it was as little as she could do to care for him, seeing she was responsible for his sufferings. The Miner did not insist, but went about arranging the camp. Cutting large quantities of fir limbs he constructed two booths tight and warm. In them he made deep beds of the twigs of evergreens. On these he arranged the blankets, and bringing heaps of dry wood he prepared for the all-night fires which would keep them comfortable. Many times during the day he circled the camp, and at all times kept a close watch.

After a time Norton slept, while the silent girl sat beside him in pensive meditation. It seemed she had never really seen this man before. How noble he was! She had known this before, but not as she knew it now. She boldly compared him with all the men she had ever known, and knew that they, not he, suffered by the contrast. She was conscious of some subtle change going on in her nature, but could not analyze it. It was working by a law which asks no permission to operate and which dictates the policy of the soul.

As she sat thus, baffled by her thoughts, a certain torturing one thrust itself upon her. Suppose he should die? She had not considered that possible for a minute, and yet he might. Instantly her eyes brimmed with tears and she threw out her hands with

a gesture of pleading. Once, in placing the fresh pack on his forehead she found it necessary to push back his hair, which fell over her hand. The contact thrilled her, and her cheeks leaped with flame. The touch aroused him, and his hand closed upon hers faintly, though he was still unconscious. She did not withdraw it immediately. She knew she should, but she did not. Then the ring she wore reminded her, and she rose with a sigh and walked to where the sunlight and the shade cut apart with a keen edge.

A frown had taken the place of the look of tenderness. Why was *he* not there, wounded for her? Always when she needed help it was this man who came to give her aid. In the fight at the Big Willow he had saved her father's life. On the mountain he had taken her to safety. Now he had shielded her with his body from a fate worse than death.

"Where are you, Richard DuMont, where are you?" she asked of the space between the trees. "Had you been among those who risked all to save me; had your body been thrust between me and those who sought to destroy me, then had my heart been as a deepening summer toward you, instead of a cooling autumn." When the Miner returned he found Mary walking about in a careless abstraction. The food he prepared they ate almost in silence.

With the morning came the rescuers crashing among the hills. In big joy, King Morrison clasped his daughter to his breast. Richard DuMont came also, morose and silent. He rallied and pretended great satisfaction at the rescue, though he showed nothing but contempt for the men who had accomplished it. Mary noticed this and keenly resented it.

"They are all brave, noble men. I can never repay them, for they risked their lives to save me. Mr. Norton thrust his body between me and that wretch, Monte Ray, and was seriously wounded. Is he not worthy of our gratitude?"

"Just an accident, nothing more. Might have happened to any man. As to the courage part of it, serfs have done as well for their masters. There is certainly nothing about it to be thought wonderful. I should have saved him the trouble had not a wrong scent taken me in another direction. I repeat, there is nothing remarkable in the affair."

The shadow in Mary's eyes deepened as she replied: "True, it might have been another man who did this, it might have been you—but it was not, and I choose to look at the matter in a little different light. I owe him—all of them—my life, and more, and I shall make them know I appreciate it."

He flashed her a glance of angry surprise. Never had she spoken to him in that way before. Her manner, always calm and given to peace, had usually been conciliatory when there had been a difference between them. Only once had she shown such resentment, and that was when she refused to let him talk unkindly of this man as they left the valley. The look he saw in her eyes that day was in them now, intensified many times. He bit his lip with impatience.

"We were headed this way and would have found you," he went on doggedly.

"But a[illegible]day would have been too late. And [illegible]k you if you hate this man as you [illegible]t day we left the valley?"

[illegible]ted his eyes to the mountain side and

was evidently trying to hide his true feelings, but her glance held him.

"I hardly think I have changed my views of his fanatical theories."

"But leaving that out, what do you say of his courage and unselfishness?"

DuMont shot a glance of scorn at her. "How far can we remove a man from his doctrines? If he believes as a fool is he not a fool?"

"But has it not occurred to you that he has rendered you some little service, if—if—what you have said to me be true. You have said I was necessary to your happiness. If so, you should not overlook the fact that he has restored me to you."

"Not this man alone?"

"True, there were the other two; they were equally brave. But he was wounded by protecting me with his body."

"It was doubtless unnecessary. Perhaps a personal interest. Bah! the rescue would have been accomplished anyway. I shall always regret that it was not my fortune to be there, for you know, Miss Morrison, I would risk my life to serve you. I am a gentleman, a true gentleman, and such are always at the disposal of ladies in distress."

Red anger burned in the eyes of the aroused girl. How was it she had ever thought this man worthy of respect? A feeling that she had been deceived—cheated—came to her, and she slipped the ring she wore from her finger and dropped it in her pocket. How could this man feel for her as he had declared, and yet not experience gratitude when she was restored to him? A soreness came to her heart. In the

nature of Mary Morrison there was a full measure of unselfish courage and justice, and the one who hoped to retain her regard would need to have these elements. She had seen Richard DuMont with the mask off, and he had shown himself capable of the meanest hate and jealousy. After looking at him as though she had never seen him before, she turned without a word and began helping her father and Baldwin make the wounded man as comfortable as possible. A litter had been constructed between two horses, and with her own hands she wove a protection from the sun over his face. DuMont watched her, his eyes full of sullen hatred.

As the line wound out of the cañon Mary and DuMont rode at the rear. She had refused to return to the valley before Norton, as DuMont had insisted she should do. He had pleaded her weariness, and the needless time wasted, but she had silenced him with a look. He was not blind to the fact that he had lost much ground with the girl, for she took no pains to hide it, and he began to try to win back what his hasty speech had taken away. That she had formed a new estimate of his character he was well aware, and he feared an open rupture between them. Inwardly he cursed the man who had been the cause of this, and true to his own dark nature, planned a vengeance which would satisfy the malice which filled him.

However, he disguised his feelings and became the soul of considerate attention. Several times he made a chance to say something pleasant of Norton. He begged her to understand him; that his hasty speech had been the result of the disappointment he felt in being denied the chance to prove his love for her by

suffering to secure her liberty and happiness. Certainly, he felt the deepest gratitude for the men who had saved her. How could he feel otherwise? Little by little he softened the coldness which had come between them, and, unknown to him, she put the ring back on her finger. It was her nature to be loyal, though she might suffer much in doing so.

Night came before they reached the valley, for they were compelled to go very slowly. In some places they had to cut out the trail on account of the litter, for the jolting and twisting of the horses was very painful to Norton. The moon rose through a notch in the range, flooding the great trough which cleft the mountains from east to west. Norton lay upon his side watching objects and shadowy spots go by. Once Mary rode up very close to him and seemed to be looking down into the darkness which hid his face. The hunger for her which had come to be at least a half-confessed thing woke and cried. It was hard, this Plimsoll line which separated the girl from him, and he forgot the ache of his wound to thrust his will against it manfully.

If DuMont had expected Mary to leave the company at the forks of the road, he was doomed to disappointment, for she quietly expressed her determination to go on to the Widow Rogers's place, and wait till Norton had been made comfortable. A sense of obligation prompted her. This man had risked his life for her, and he should understand that she appreciated it.

Seeing the trend of things, DuMont used every blandishment he knew to soften the mood of the girl, and he had succeeded to his own satisfaction when he left her at the door of the Morrison ranch house.

"God! She's set in her mood to-night," he mused as he rode away. "But she'll come to my terms all right in the end. Never saw one of them I could not dominate sooner or later. She loves me too well to do anything serious. It's one of her woman moods. A sham fancy of owing that hypocrite something. Bah! I'll make her hate him as I do before I'm done with this thing."

Alone in her own room, Mary was tossed with unrest. She had glimpsed the inner chamber of DuMont's nature, and she had beheld a death's mask. Not even the loyalty of her nature could blind her to that fact. Weary with conflicting emotions, she threw herself on the bed and slept. When she woke, the sun was flooding the room. For a long time she lay thinking, her mind going over the strange events of the last few days. The coolness she had felt the night before returned, and she rose with a little sigh of discontent.

CHAPTER XXIV

A FAIR VISITOR

An unrest had come to Mary Morrison which would not depart. The pageantry of autumn woods ceased to bring her the old joy. DuMont found in her the cold stateliness of a glacier, and he cursed himself for a fool, and sought in every way to remove the wall between them. Dark schemes came to his mind, and he planned according to the evil that was in him. To Mary he became profuse in his compliments regarding Norton's conduct, declaring that he intended to hear him as much as possible.

To all this Mary replied that the brave were always generous, and that she could not forget what he had said in the first heat of his temper. She was compelled in spite of herself to set his words against each other. Self-conceit, which is the great stock of small souls, began to wane in DuMont's view of the girl. He had been over-confident of his power to hold her, and he grew anxious lest he find the gulf too wide to be bridged.

Each day the King rode over to see how Norton was getting along, and always on his return he met Mary at the gate, her eyes asking the question which her lips did not frame.

"He's improving, girl, but restless. He wants to be on the trails again. Says there are a dozen camps he must make before winter shuts him out, and that he

must take in reading matter because the boys are looking for it," the old ranchman said one morning when he came back.

All that day Mary was deep in thought. More and more it seemed to her that she owed it to this man to visit him in person, and make him understand that she was interested in his recovery. It was some time, however, before she could bring herself to put the thought into action. When she sought to analyze this feeling, it baffled her. The frankness of the Mountain Land made such a thing no breach of propriety, yet she hesitated. When Baldwin had been low with a hill-fever, she had gone repeatedly to do what she could to make him comfortable. At last the impulse won and she rode away through the afternoon sunshine in the direction of the Rogers ranch. She found a few late roses in the garden and took them along—they might cheer his room a little. Then he needed to be told to keep still and forget about the camps till he was fully recovered. She would tell him that and he would have to listen to her. She colored a little at the consciousness of this personal interest, but indulged it nevertheless.

Mary knew she was just beginning to understand this strong, brave man. She had come to see that he was very different from men in general. Wounded and confined to his bed, he was feverish to be off in service for others. To-day, making his body a shield to protect her from harm; to-morrow, restless to be doing good to those in need. There was something fascinating about his courage as well. Once she had seen him in the secret place with the moon in his face, but she had not stopped, for she felt that she

stood on holy ground. It had all seemed strange to her then, but she understood him better now.

As she rode slowly on across the brown meadows the sound of a horse's feet behind her caused her to turn. Richard DuMont was approaching at a gallop. He bowed gracefully as he came up.

"You must have been dreaming, Miss Morrison, for I signaled you several times, but you did not seem to hear."

"I did not," she replied colorlessly.

"May I ask of what you were thinking so intently?"

"You may. I was thinking how one thing dies for another; how all the blades of grass cannot grow, nor all the seeds germinate; some of them must yield their possibilities that others may realize theirs. The many must die that the few may exist. You may guess where this led me. I suppose Mr. Norton could make the correct applications of the matter." She glanced at him and saw a cloud settle on his face.

"That is certainly a very melancholy subject," he remarked, indifferently. "Could you not find something more cheerful?"

A little color crept into her cheeks. "That may be a matter of opinion. I am sure that a subject which covers all fields of fact, and is in harmony with them, cannot do harm to the reason. I have concluded that the brain is as true to the universe as the solar system?"

"What application do you imagine Mr. Norton would make?" He eyed her critically as he put the question.

"That which would interpret the claim of his creed, the vicarious feature of it, I think."

"But you do not go that far, I hope?"

"Why not?"

"It is an insult to reason."

"How is it that so many who are educated and brilliant believe it?"

"They are all fanatics—all of them."

"You mean then—?"

"That it is superstition, and fit only for the baser breeds."

"But my mother believed it, I am told. I think I resent that. You are very radical in your statements, Mr. DuMont."

"Pardon, pardon, please! I did not intend it. But it is an exploded theory. Science has demolished it long ago."

"What branch of science?"

"All science."

"Please be specific."

"But I hate the subject. Let us speak of other things."

"If you desire it. Remember, however, that I take the liberty to differ with you. I am forced to see that one thing does die for another. It is true in the ocean and on land. Fang and claw demonstrate this. It cannot be that science would even dare dispute this fact. Seeing that this is true in the natural, I was wondering if it might not be the order of the spiritual."

"Dismiss it. Those are old wives' fables. The intelligent have discarded them long ago."

"Why, then, are writers forever compiling volumes on both sides of this question? And how is it that you have spent so many hours in my library reading

after authors who have spent their lives declaring there is nothing in it? If it is indeed a myth, how foolish for men to debate a myth."

He shrugged his shoulders, a thing which always reminded her of his extraction. "A mere hour to idle away, that's all. I could have been in better business. Have a care that the psalm-singer does not turn your head with his sophistries. Bah! The method of Jed Anderson should be employed wherever one of these fellows appears, for they go about living on the ignorance and credulity of the people."

The anger in the breast of DuMont had made him reckless. Given always to the gratification of his wishes, it was not possible for him to know a perfect control, and his habits of self-indulgence constantly betrayed him into foolish actions not calculated to keep good faith with this woman.

Mary's cheeks flamed. "Perhaps you would be willing to follow Anderson's example; if so, I can furnish you a rope." She turned her eyes upon him defiantly.

"O, come, I did not intend to provoke you," he broke off. "I was too fast. I am abrupt in my ways, but I don't mean things as they sound. Certainly, think of what you please; you have my consent to do so."

"I should choose my thoughts anyway," she answered, a little scorn in her voice.

"Please forgive me," he pleaded in a milder tone.

"I do," she answered, relaxing somewhat. "But I am not a child; you must remember that."

"Then let us forget it and spend the day riding along the uplands."

"Not to-day; I am going somewhere else."

"May I ask where?"

"To see the man who came so near giving his life for me. I understand he is restless, and I am taking these last roses with a hope that I may be able to bring a bit of cheer to him. If you are in doubt of whom I speak, I may say it is the 'psalm-singer,' to whom you referred a moment ago."

DuMont drew up abruptly. "You shall not go! I tell you that you shall not!" He was pale with anger now and his restraint was gone.

"I shall do just that," she replied, quietly. "I am arbiter of my own actions, and shall not permit you to interfere. Please turn back and bother me no more. It seems that we cannot get along to-day."

"I think I have a right to make a slight objection," he ventured, touching the ring on her finger with the tip of his riding whip.

"And please tell me what taking these flowers to a man who risked his life to serve me has to do with what this ring represents. Your confidence in me should make your peace a certainty."

"But I think it should suggest a certain limiting of one's liberty; don't you?"

"A certain kind of liberty. Yet you will remember that I have asked you no questions. I hardly thought I had a right to, for confidence forbids suspicion. I could not feel an affection for anyone I could not trust."

"But I insist that it might have much to do with it; there are loose tongues in the valley."

"You doubt me then?" She slipped the ring from her finger and threw it into the grass.

"So easy as that?" he questioned, an injured expression on his face.

"Use your memory, please—was not everything conditional?"

"I never thought of it that way."

"You could not think of it otherwise."

"But I counted on your feelings for me."

"I do not confess to having any, but if so, would not some things that have happened have a tendency to change them?"

DuMont winced. "I see no reason for a change."

"But I reserved the right to do just that. Have you forgotten?"

"I did not wish such a liberty."

"But I insisted that you should have the chance to change your mind."

"How could I ask that when my love—"

"I would rather not speak of that. The word is sacred. Let me remind you that there have been no familiarities between us."

DuMont bit his lip savagely. In spite of his self-conceit, he was beginning to see that he had damaged his standing with her very much.

"I have wondered at that."

"You had no reason to. You were very urgent, you remember. I was not given time or opportunity to investigate my feelings, and I have been compelled to do that since. The gods were very kind to keep me from a complete promise."

He searched her face with a glance which read deep into her soul—a glance that was not good. Till now she had seemed anxious to please him in an indifferent way. She had not crossed him, and always there was

an evident desire to have the relations between them pleasant. Now she defied him, and in his heart he cursed himself, for he felt that he was to blame. He knew she had seen under the mask, and it would take time and shrewdness to erase what she had discovered from her mind. He had been too sure, too conceited. Concealing his real mood, he burst into a feigned laugh.

"O, dash it all! let it go. I was more than half joking. I am more or less interested in that fellow, and hope your visit will restore him completely. I am sure it would have that effect on me in a like condition." He dismounted and found the ring: "Here, put it on. You have worn it too long to take it off now. I am looking forward to other lands with you—the time is short. Let us not disagree at this late hour."

She dropped it into a pocket of her dress, and then looked at him searchingly.

"But I was not joking, if you were. I am altogether serious in this matter. The ring has stood for far more than has ever really existed between us. It was at your constant importunity that I consented to wear it. Please keep that in mind."

"But you will wear it?" he pleaded.

"I will not promise. If I come to feel differently—yes. I shall wait and see." She rode on without further words, and she did not look back.

DuMont watched her as she went down the bank into the water, the flying drops from her horse's feet falling over her like globes of gold. A hot oath filtered between his shut teeth.

"The whole thing is about to fall through," he muttered, "and all because of that whimpering hypocrite.

Ah, my good fellow, wait! Richard DuMont knows how to get even; when he strikes it is with the poison of an asp." Turning, he galloped away and was not seen in the valley for days.

A tumult of feelings ran riot in the breast of Mary Morrison. Taking the ring from her pocket she looked at it dreamily. It was to have been two months from that time. How far off the date appeared! It was as something she had dreamed. So often DuMont had spoken of their relationship as an engagement that she had come to almost feel that such was the case. She had not altogether resented this, though aware that she was passing through a state of probation in which she was waiting for the fates to make the end clear. Perhaps, it would all end as he desired. That, however, was the point which had always seemed impossible when she permitted herself to think of it seriously. She marveled now that she had not said more of the conditional features of their relationship. With a sigh she put Wildwind into a gallop and swept along the road with the breeze in her face. It was bracing and her spirits revived.

Norton was reclining in a drift of pillows, a book open before him, and all the blinds up at the windows. A zephyr drifted in, bringing a smell of pine. From where he lay he could see the cattle on the lowlands, and the banked gold of the autumn woods beyond. For days he had been watching the deepening of the crimson and purple along the streams, and the fading of the hemlocks on the mountains. Feverishly anxious to be on the trails, Norton had marked the deepening color on the hills. There was much to be done and only he to do it. He had suffered too, more than any

one imagined. The visits of the King and Baldwin broke the monotony, but the one for whom he had risked his life had not come. He did not blame her; he did not expect her. Yet he hungered for her more now than before, if possible. Weeks, months, he had tried to put the thought of her face from him, but it would not go, and he had come to dwell with it as some sweet, sad pain.

When the Widow Rogers came to his room telling him that Mary Morrison had called to see him, his cheeks flushed a little, and his heart beat faster, then he was himself again. "I shall be glad to see her," he replied calmly.

She came with the late roses and her face aglow. She reminded Norton of the radiance of flowers. She gave him her hand frankly.

"Father tells me you are improving, and I am so glad. Really, I shall never forgive myself for bringing this upon you."

"Please don't blame yourself in the least," he begged.

"I did not come, but—but—it was not that I was unconcerned." She colored slightly, but her glance met his without wavering.

"I understand," he replied in a tone which made her search his face questioningly.

"The flowers are the last of the season. I hope they may bring a bit of cheer, for it must be dreadful to lie here with the wonderful days going by in their chariots of gold. Such sunsets! Really, I have watched to see angels slipping through with messages of peace."

"I know it is great, and the flowers—they are

beautiful!" He took them and searched the petals as if he looked into the faces of old friends. "There is a promise in every one of them—a promise of snow and—spring after that."

"The 'Last Rose of Summer' is one of my favorites among songs. Old, but very sweet."

"I love it!" he replied enthusiastically.

"You sing it, I know," said Widow Rogers, hurrying downstairs to get the guitar, giving Mary no chance to protest. In the mind of that good woman anything that would add to the pleasure of the Guide was not to be neglected.

With a little demur, which was very charming, Mary took the instrument, and after putting it in tune sang, her voice lingering over the pathetic measures:

"So soon may *I* follow,
When friendships decay,
And from love's shining circle
The gems drop away."

During the singing one of the roses, more frail than the rest, fell apart and showered its leaves over the bed. When he looked, Norton saw that he held only the naked stem. The chain of thoughts which it started brought a sigh to his lips. Perhaps it was prophetic of his life—the undated days to come.

"You have suffered much, I can see it," she said, putting the instrument down.

"A little," he agreed quietly. "I have found the inactivity the hardest, however. The camps are calling me, and the trails will soon be banked with snow. The time is so precious. But we saved you, Miss Morrison, and that pays for it all."

Her eyes grew moist. She tried to measure this

unselfish man, but found it hard to do. He had offered his life for her and yet insisted on calling it nothing. She knew that he had suffered, but his only complaint was that he could not serve others. He was different from the men she had known. The paleness which had come to his face seemed to heighten its spirituality, and brought out its lines with clearness. As she thought it over she knew there was no change she wished to make in him.

"I think I have been missing the real meaning of life," she began abruptly. "All morning I have been thinking how one thing dies for another; and how the life of the one is conditioned on the sacrifice of the other. I was saved and you wounded. By your suffering I have been kept from infinite miseries."

Norton felt a surge of joy. "We talked of that once, you remember. I am glad you see it." He could give her up if only she ceased to see through the mists and darkness of doubt. It would be hard, very hard, but easier if she came to her vision first.

"I have thought of that day many times, and the ground we covered. It is a law of the universe, and —I—think—I—believe—it." She went to one of the windows, and stood looking out over the fields to where the birches stood pink against the russet of withered mint. After a time she turned to him again:

"It is awful that you have suffered so much. I shall be more careful in the future. But I do love the moon and the mystery of night."

"I would gladly receive a deeper wound if it would save you from harm," he answered impulsively, "and so would any true man," he modified, for he had not intended to say so much.

She smiled a little sadly as she answered him: "I am empty-handed; I have lived for myself. I wish I knew how to make others happy. I have not intended to be this way, but I never—saw—the need—before. Life has been a beautiful dream to me. I have wandered through the hills caring more for the sorrows of the wild things than for the needs of men." She turned from him to the hills beyond the valley with eyes into which something wistful had come.

"But you have helped many; you have helped me."

Her eyes came back to him instantly. "That cannot be," she protested.

"I assure you it is true."

"In what way?"

"To begin with, I know you are—permit me to say it—pure—pure as the moonlight. That is an inspiration to any man. Then, you are a good listener—that comfort of a speaker. And you have helped me because you love nature and the works of the masters."

Her eyes grew dim as he went on. It was very sweet to have this man say such things about her, and she felt a desire to be worthy of his regard.

"Thank you," she said simply. "Your words mean very much to me. The riders have always been kind. But I have never tried to really help them. I see things differently now, though. That is, I hope I do. You have set me thinking on new lines, and I am not ashamed to say that I looked up and asked for help in the cave, though I was not altogether without means of defense. While crossing the stream I managed to take a knife from its scabbard and hid it in

my dress. I should have buried it in my heart had the worst come."

With a few quiet words she left him, a big hunger at his heart. It had come in a moment. It seemed that his soul was being fused with hers. Had she sensed it? No, she was too calm for that. But he was calm also. The revelation had come—the unmasking of love's deepest, purest powers to feel and desire. A universe had been created in his nature where hung the sun and stars of deathless feeling. For a while he held the fact close under the rosy lamp of hope, while the glory of it possessed him, then it went as it came, for the memory of a ring which she had worn in his presence told him that to his own heart there could never come a reason for hope.

CHAPTER XXV

THE COMING OF THE VISION

NORTON was on the trails once more. His recovery had been very rapid, considering the nature of the wound. The tan came back to his cheeks, and the old spring to his walk.

Baldwin had gone with him to the divide on his first trip, fearing that he might be too weak for the climb. The freedom of brothers characterized their dealings with each other, and a closeness of fellowship, which is only known by men, bound them together. Sometimes they talked of the events of the locality, but more often of the deeper things of Norton's work. In everything pertaining to it Baldwin showed a great interest.

While his wound was healing, Norton had been repeatedly visited by those of the riders who knew him best. Big Steve, Alex Sanders, Burke, Johnson, and others had come with their rough greetings and hearty good will. But that which had surprised him very much was a visit by two riders from the valley across the range. This was encouraging. His old vision of uniting the two sections stirred him with double insistency, and he began again the working out of his dream.

His first meeting at the Junction was characterized by the largest gathering of people ever seen at that place. The part Norton had taken in the rescue of

Mary Morrison acted as a drawing force to get out certain old-timers who had refused to have anything to do with the church up to this time. The result was that many who had stood aloof allowed their curiosity to get the better of them, and when the night arrived they led out their horses and turned their heads toward the church.

As Norton entered a wild cheer greeted him. Outside, a half dozen had wrangled for the privilege of taking care of his horse. With bluff good nature he refused this, and grew in their estimation because he did.

As he sat looking down on the swim of faces before him, seamed with storms and browned with prairie winds, a wave of love went out of his heart to these men. In their own rough ways they had made him know they trusted him, and he had responded with an open hand and a clean eye. His glance ranged over the crowd till it rested on Alex Sanders, gaunt of flank and rugged as granite: Norton always thought of him as the result of some cosmic spite which had split out a ragged slab from the general order. Not far away sat Jack Mullens, his wizened face smirking with pleasure. He had not been in his cups since that night at the Big Willow when he took a stand, and he was enjoying his clean living to the full. There sat the Miner beside his happy wife, the half grin which haunted his lank mouth showing that he was on good terms with everybody. On the other side sat Jenny Mallow, her quiet beauty and reserved air making her appear very much like some old saint. Contrasted with her was Mary Morrison. As Norton looked at her he was reminded of mist, shot through

with stars. He had often tried to define her personality. It was like—only more baffling—pools where the light falls brokenly. He had sensed the same thing in glades where the moon made maps among the shadows.

As Norton rose to speak, he was conscious of a strange warmness which filled the room like spring sunshine. He felt exalted in it, and spoke with unusual authority. The same thing touched the hearers, and a profound attention was given him. There was no undue demonstration, rather, a quiet power like the coming in of the tide.

While speaking, Norton felt the dark glance of Richard DuMont on his face. Mary did not sit by him, for the King was between them. He wondered at this a little, and was conscious of a feeling of relief which he did not take time to analyze.

A moment of silence followed the close of the discourse. Norton took his seat. The sense of responsibility which had been upon him seemed to rest on the crowd. Fear melted out of the audience and a oneness of mind held them in masterful power. The stepping of the Infinite was on their hearts.

The Miner rose; his tall frame opening like the sections of a pocket rule. Going to his own limited experience, he told them once more of the grave in the bunch grass on the Black Sand. Now, the leaves were falling over it and the grass was dead. There his mind had been opened to the things which he had come to believe. The Guide and Bill's widow had helped him to prospect more understandingly on the new belt and he thanked them. He had hung up his guns and would never take them down, unless in a

case like the fight at the cave. The lead was good, the prospecting encouraging, and the claim not for sale.

Then came Baldwin, his dark face, with its dash of wild courage, mellowed by an inner light which was good to see. His words were characteristic of the man: to the point and not many. Mullens waxed fervent:

"Look at me!" he cried. "Once my eyes were blurred with drink, and I was a disgrace to my wife and my friends, but now I am a man with the rest of you, and my eyes are clear. Why, boys, I plunked a coyote a hundred and fifty yards last week; off-hand, too—how's that? Don't it take clear eyes and a steady nerve to do it, eh? Before I changed I couldn't hit a stable from the inside. I tell you there's been a change in me."

"That's so, Jack!" called a ranchman from the rear. "There's a mighty big change in ye, and it's all right."

The Widow Rogers started a song, pleading as the winds in the junipers:

"Jesus, Lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly."

When it was done they all sat melted and expectant. Flushed faces and parted lips showed what emotions were working in every breast. Hearts were turning to wax. There was an element of life in it all—cell-building life; an expansion without effort, even as the swale grass and the pond lilies come to their forms. Norton looked at Mary. Her face was transfigured. At the sight his heart leaped. The air was tense with surrender. Revelation was becoming the logic of their hearts. Only a word was needed to precipitate the tense emotion into action, and Norton rose and spoke

it. With hand and arm stretched he gave the command to obedience. As the human center of his desires, his glance came back to Mary, and their eyes met. It was a look of understanding. He had not dominated her with his personality; she was acting from her own convictions. Norton flashed his pride of her in an unmasked glance.

She rose with flushed face and swimming eyes. Norton saw DuMont turn quickly in his seat and stare at her. For a moment she stood irresolute, then in a voice which revealed her efforts at calmness, she told them of her change of ideas and the vision which had come to her.

"I think it was in the cave that I felt my need for the first time in any serious way. And when I had asked for help and it came, I made a vow, and I am keeping it. The sweetness of it all is that this has grown out of the shining of stars and the moonlight. It will not spoil the sound of the winds, for I have often heard the whisper of worship in the grass. All this is left me: the hurry of white waters and the wonder of the wild, only the vision has been enlarged. I have seen the morning breaking on the peaks which stand up around this valley, but grander, more wonderful than that, I watch the rising of another sun on transcendent heights—the effulgence of eternal day rolling over the Mountains of the Morning."

Norton saw that her vision had come. With a cry of joy the Widow Rogers went to Mary and took her in her arms. The wife of the Miner followed, and the three mingled their tears after the manner of women. Those at the back of the church stood up to get a better view, yet there was no disorder. All

knew Mary Morrison, and the love which they had for her intensified the influence of what she had done.

Just what happened after that, Norton never knew; for when he raised his face from his hands where he had buried it he saw the King holding his daughter in his arms, while she sobbed with joy. The old man beckoned for audience. The moment when he had stood by his horse while the Guide asked for the safe return of his child he had promised that he would acknowledge the benefit if heaven should grant it. It had been given, and he was a man of his word. From now on they might count him as committed to the church and all it stood for. There was one thing too that he wished with all his heart, and that was the peace of the valleys. Whatever his part had been in the feud he would do his best to make it right. He would meet any man more than half way on a mission of reconciliation. Some of the older men shook their heads in a mystified way. Strange things were happening—things they could not understand.

It was at this time that Norton noticed the absence of DuMont. He had left the house while Mary was in the arms of her father.

Outwardly calm, Norton knew a great inner joy. He was conscious of men coming to wring his hand, and of words which voiced the gratitude of rugged breasts. Jenny Mallow slipped into the seat by Mary and wept silently on the neck of her friend. In the hush which followed, Norton dismissed them.

Baldwin rode beside his friend that night as they went up the road from the Junction.

"Looked mighty good to see the old King soften up a bit, Guide, didn't it? I have been wishing that

the thing would strike him, and I know you have too. Now that he has taken his stand he will never back down on it—the old man is that way."

"You can imagine how much I have desired what happened to-night!" Norton replied with emotion.

"I like what he said about the other valley too. The fact is that has been a lot of foolishness from the start. The younger folks don't really understand the cause of it, but it has something to do with the King and old man Hickland over in the other valley. Both men had their influence, and naturally enough the rest took sides."

"Did you notice that DuMont went out while the King and his daughter were on their feet?"

"Yes."

"I take him for a villain, in whose eyes life would be very cheap if one got in the way of his plans."

"And you are right in that opinion, there's not a doubt," Baldwin replied decisively.

At this point in the conversation they entered a narrow strip of woods. At the farther side Baldwin drew rein abruptly.

"We are being followed," he said in a low tone. "I heard steps distinctly."

Whirling, the rider dashed back, revolver in hand. A man leaped into the undergrowth and disappeared.

"There is some scheme on foot, Guide, and it looks like we might be figured in," Baldwin commented as he rode up.

"It may be. It was a sore disappointment to the kidnapers to have us spoil their plans."

"That was a spy, all right, and I have a notion we will not get off with this thing in any easy manner."

"But Monte Ray is dead!"

"True, but others are not." The men looked at each other.

"He is capable of any villainy."

"And he can scheme nothing else."

"There were more in that plot to ruin King Morrison than we may imagine. You remember the man in the glade spoke of others who were looking after this end of the matter."

"I do, Guide, and I have reason to believe that some who are in the seats of authority in this county are in the gang. We must be on guard, for I am sure there is something in the brew which concerns us very vitally."

"What reason have you for believing that?"

"There are many. One is that we have never been able to get convictions at Senora. When one of these fellows is brought up for trial there is always a bunch to swear him out. The judge and the sheriff know they lie, nevertheless they turn them loose. Alex Sanders caught a chap on his trail the other day. He thought it was a cougar, at first, but when he turned, there the man was skulking behind some young firs."

"Did he know him?"

"The man got away too quickly for that. But he was a spy. I tell you, Guide, there is a black frame-up of some kind going on and we must stay awake."

"Keep a sharp watch and if anything happens let me know at once," said Norton, taking the hand of the rider with a warm "good-night."

They had reached the parting of the ways and the rider dashed off into the clasping dusk, leaving Norton to go on alone.

CHAPTER XXVI

DAYS OF DARKNESS

THE morning broke over the Mountain Land. Norton led Dan from the stall and rode away. He had planned a trip which would take him from the valley for a week.

The night before he had been called down the valley to visit an old ranchman laid by with a fever, and had returned by way of the Junction at a late hour. There had been men lounging in the store as he went, but on his return the place was dark and deserted. As he turned at the bend of the road a form slipped into the deeper gloom of the forest; he had seen it, a smudge against the darkness. When he had passed, the man stepped into the road and listened till the sound of the horse's steps died away, then he turned back with a low chuckle.

As he rode on Norton caught the smell of withered mint and the spume of the marshes. On the slopes hung a deep melancholy which touched the senses with pain.

As he crossed the valley he saw Scotty Baldwin dashing over the meadows toward him.

"Where now, Guide?" he asked, reining up at the line fence.

"The Last Chance region. Must make the trip now or the snow will shut me out."

"You are killing yourself climbing the ranges.

There is enough here to keep half a dozen men busy. You need help bad. How long will you be gone?"

"A week, perhaps."

The rider shook his head and looked unseeingly at the brown grass.

"You sure need help," he went on half to himself.

"You are right there," Norton replied, searching the rider's face.

"Don't use yourself up trying to do something for those fellows over there. Remember, we have a claim on you here in the valley and we have no notion of releasing you." With a laugh Baldwin turned his horse and galloped away.

From a swell of the mountain, Norton waved farewell, and the rider answered it with a wide circle of his hand.

For an hour Norton gave Dan his head, going at an indifferent gait along the mouths of cañons and across level stretches of ground toward the upper valley. He was fighting his old battle over—fighting it with a certain knowledge that he would be defeated. Strange thoughts made rebellion in his mind; rebel emotions declared for anarchy in his heart. All he had felt and experienced stood out very clearly in the scope of his more sober contemplations. The black glory of hate, the white glory of love, the chaste power of a face which had come to be as the breath of life to him, mingled in a feverish chaos which defied order. He was learning that the prayer of beauty is very widely diffused; that the love of woman is second only to the love of God, and that all the best pulses of life ride upon the high steeds of man's ability to worship. At the rim of the valley, where a forested cañon

opened between steep hills, he took a dim trail and was soon lost in the depths of the painted woods.

Baldwin went on rapidly for a time, then came down to a walk. He too was in a troubled frame of mind. At a place where the river swept in against the kneeling hills, and the laurel made green halls on the ridges, he dismounted. After removing the bridle so his horse could eat, he cast himself down at full length, his face in his hands. He was agitated with feelings which he could not define. There had come convictions of late which troubled him. Noon came and went, and the sun dipped far down the west before the clatter of a horse's feet aroused him.

"Hello, Sanders!" Baldwin called, rising as the rider dashed up. "What's the hurry? Get down and rest your hands and face—lots of room in this hotel—Say, what's up?—Out with it!"

"Where's the Guide?"

"Crossed the hills this morning to the Last Chance region. Why?"

"The Junction store was robbed last night. The sheriff is there, and he has found all the goods in the Guide's room, at the bottom of a trunk. It's a great mess. Wish he was here."

Baldwin's eyes grew dangerous, and his words came like breaking glass:

"It's a lie! The Guide did not do that, and the man who says he did will have to settle with me."

"I am with you, Scotty; it's a plot. But how did them things git in the Guide's room? He didn't put them there, I know that, but how will he clear the thing up?" Sanders's brow contracted with perplexity.

"They have been slipped in there while he was gone.

There is a window opening on the porch—a ladder—a little stealth—somebody mean enough to do it—the trap sprung. It's all clear to me. But I'll see them through in this—take that from me."

"You got it exactly," Sanders replied confidently.

"Who suggested going to the Guide's room?"

"That fellow, Marlatt, the one we chased off the drive last fall for stealing from the boys. Says he saw the Guide stop at the store. Then he followed and watched him take the stuff in the house. The thing that will give them a chance to be mean is the fact that the Guide was down that way late last night to see old man Tomkins, who has a fever. That's about the way the thing stands. When I got the points in the case I struck out to find you."

"It's all a lie, and I'll choke it down the throat of the man who tells me it is not, I promise them that." Baldwin's words were like smitten steel.

"I'm with you, Baldwin, to the last shell in old Hannah Colts, if they insist on that way of arguing it out. But what was botherin' me is the standin' of the Guide. There's always some that will believe such things, and they'll tell it everywhere for the truth. Their scheme is to bring him into court at Senora, and you know what that means."

"Simply conviction, for the officers and the gang are all in together. But he don't go to Senora over this, not for a minute. This is one case where justice will be done."

"Put her there, Baldwin! Put her there! I'm your huckleberry for anything that turns up." The men's hands closed in that slow clasp which is always a covenant.

DAYS OF DARKNESS

"Did you say the sheriff is down there, Alex?"

"Yes, got in before noon."

"Did you notice his horse?"

"Sure! Not a wet hair on him."

"He didn't ride from Senora this morning then. Hanging around handy. He's one of the worst of the gang, for he's hiding his rascality behind his office. We'll go to the Junction and see what is happening."

The five miles which separated the two men from the scene of the alleged robbery were soon covered, and they whirled down the street in a cloud of dust. The crowd turned toward them as they approached, and Baldwin saw the sheriff coming to meet them, a significant leer on his face.

"Hello, Baldwin, seen the preacher lately? I got a piece of paper I want to read to him, and then I'll show him the sights down Senora way. Clear case. Found the goods right in his room."

"And I have no doubt you put them there, or had it done, Tom Foster. This is a scheme to ruin this man, fixed up by you thieves. But take it from me, your scheme won't work. The man who says he put those things in that room is a liar, and I challenge him, understand? from a toothpick to a cannon." Baldwin dismounted as he spoke.

"He did it all right, there ain't no doubt about that," Foster replied, scowling.

"You can't say that to me and get off with it. I'll give you just ten seconds to retract every word or I'll strangle them back down your throat." Baldwin advanced, while the crowd surged in to witness the contest, among them Richard DuMont.

"I thought you'd joined the church, Baldwin?" said

Foster, backing away from the man whose eyes seemed to scorch him.

"I have, and that's one reason you can't lie on my friends. Half your time is gone. Come over with that retraction and do it quick."

"I didn't say he did it; I only said I found the goods in his room."

"You said it was a clear case, and that you wanted to show him the county seat. Now you retract those words or there'll be something doing here in a minute." The hand at the sheriff's throat closed smotheringly.

"O, well, Baldwin, let it go. I was too fast. I don't want any trouble with you. A man's never guilty till it's proved that he is. Will that do?"

"I'll let you off on it. But remember, Tom Foster, I know you for what you are, a rustler and a thief. It was a girl before, now it's the man who helped take her from your slimy hands. You hate him because he kept you from stealing twenty thousand dollars from King Morrison—you and your gang. Keep your mouth shut, and take it from me, you will never have the pleasure of showing that man the county seat."

A savage expression covered the sheriff's face, but he moved off without replying. Baldwin shot a glance at DuMont which said much. The man received it with a sneer, and turned away.

From the Junction, Baldwin galloped straight to the Morrison Ranch, after giving Sanders careful instructions what to do. Where Norton had gone must be kept from all but those whom he knew he could trust. He figured that the sheriff and his followers would

watch the trails leading into the valley that they might intercept him. That would give time to do something toward self-defense.

He found the old ranchman much agitated, but Mary calm and confident.

"It is a plan to ruin him, concocted by those who tried to ruin me and my father. There is not one word of truth in what they have said." Baldwin was glad for her loyalty.

"You are right. But the wires are all laid for his conviction. We must not let them find him. If he should fall into their hands, then there is another way." Baldwin looked at her significantly.

She did not answer him, but there was encouragement in her eyes.

"We must keep him from coming into the valley till we have time to uncover this thing. I confess that I do not just understand how to get at it, but I have a feeling that Hunchy's store is the center of their operations over here."

"I am sure of it. But it will be hard to keep him from facing them, for you know he is that way. Remember, I am at your service in any way I can help you. He did much for me and I will not fail to do what I can. They would, perhaps, not watch me so closely as they would you men."

"We will need several watchers on the trails well back from the valley. You could do that."

"Where did he go."

"To the Last Chance section."

"When does he return?"

"About a week."

"Do you know by what trail?"

"No, you cannot be sure of that. There are several leading in from that country."

"I will not be idle," she answered decidedly.

Mary watched the rider disappear beyond the cottonwoods at the bend of the river. For the first time she realized how much she wished to serve this man. With a sigh of discontent she returned to the house, and going to her room sat down to think. Drawing back the curtains, she watched the cañons fill with shadows and the line of sunlight creep up the hills, till the last peak had dropped into purple haze, and the dusk told her that the autumn night was at hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

A MEETING ON THE TRAIL

As Baldwin expected, there was a strict watch kept on all the trails. The sheriff hung about the neighborhood receiving daily reports from his henchmen and directing the movements of those engaged in the search.

Sanders had gone to find Norton, but he arrived at the different camps only to find that he had left for other points. Fearing that he would be needed in the valley, the rider returned by a forced ride, and reported his failure to Baldwin.

Every effort was made to get at the plot, but without success. The Miner entered into the work of exposure with a will, and he and Scotty haunted the valley by night, especially the grove at the rear of the Junction store.

Norton would be returning soon; his appearance was to be expected at any moment. If he should fall into the hands of his enemies, Baldwin had resolved in his own mind to rescue his friend or die in the attempt. There were others of his own mind, and these he could count on to stand by him to the end.

As the twilight of a crisp night fell Mary rode away from the ranch house toward the river. That was not the way she wished to go, but assured that she was watched, she wished to throw the spies off the track. For three nights she had gone forth at this hour, re-

turning when the sun rose and some one had taken her place in the passes.

Crossing the valley, she rode on leisurely till deep dusk covered the hills, then she put Wildwind in a smart gallop, and circling back, entered the forest where there was no trail. Out of the gloom came the walking of stealthy things, and a mournful complaint of owls. A new element had entered into the wild—a sense of menace—and for the first time Mary felt something of lonelines if not fear. A wolf howled beyond the cañon, and the long-drawn sound seemed to voice some old wrong. Here and there she picked her way around rocks or turned aside to avoid tangles of dead timber brought down when the snow slipped from the mountains. She was filled with fear that she might not keep Norton from falling into the trap set for him. It would be so easy for him to slip past her in the forest, or he might return to the valley by another trail. Once trapped, she knew that desperate things would follow, The thought of it spurred her onward and gave her courage. Wildwind responded to the urging of his rider, and took the steepness of the climb with strong, swift limbs.

She was making for a place near the summit where the trail ran between cliffs which stood up like the walls of houses on either side. Back of these the undergrowth and small trees grew thick, making it necessary for any one going that way to pass between the bluffs. At this titan gate Mary dismounted and led her horse into a grove of young hemlocks, where she fastened him securely, and then took up her watch at the end of the opening hidden in the branches of a young spruce.

A MEETING ON THE TRAIL

From where she stood she could see the dim outline of vast ranges jumbled against the north, and far below, the deep, mist-filled valley. For the first time the endlessness of it all seemed to awe her; she was so small, such a mere atom in the center of a universe of power and design. She raised her eyes to the sky, down which streamed a cataract of stars.

"If only I might save him! If only I might return something of his kindness to me!" she breathed in a half whisper. Then she stood silent and expectant, her lips parted and her eyes slowly filling with tears. In that moment she knew that she wished to serve this man for her own sake as well as his. Something warm as sunshine on brown grass filled her heart, and she pressed her hands over it to still its wild beating. Above her the trees dreamed. Beyond, were the cliffs, and above them the distant worlds on a sudden became very close and tender.

Her thoughts were recalled by the soft pantings of some animal which moved toward her through the glade; a wolf was circling about, sniffing the ground. She had come to have no fear of these creatures, and stood watching this one, which was an unusually large animal, with indifferent interest. A cougar wailed somewhere in the forest, and the wolf turned toward the sound with raised bristles and bared fangs. For some time the beast stood taking the air with twisting nose, then lifting his head toward the stars he gave the long hunger call of the pack.

Suddenly the wolf grew tense, swung sidewise to the trail and half squatted, his head turned toward the opening between the walls. For a moment the animal stood listening, then swift as a moon wraith the gray

shape vanished. A sound came to Mary's ears from up the trail; it was the crunch of iron shoes on small gravel. With beating heart she raised the branches and peered out. As she did so some one rode into the other end of the passage and a moment later emerged from the gloom quite close to where she stood. Slipping from her hiding place, she glided into the trail. Norton drew up as though he had seen a spirit.

"What are you doing here, Miss Morrison—another of your night rides, I suppose?" he said, bending down and noting the unusual paleness of her face.

"Hist!" she warned, holding up her finger, for her quick ear had caught another sound below them. Something was moving the shingle on the trail. "They are coming now. Put your horse among those young trees there; quick, there is not a minute to lose. I will tell you all when I can."

He obeyed her without further words. The warning note in her voice told him that something was wrong, and he knew that she had come to aid him. The next moment they were standing together in the meshes of the young evergreen.

"It is another plot, this time to ruin you. I came to warn you. Listen! Do you not hear them coming nearer?"

"I hear some one on the trail."

"They are coming to this place to watch. Thank God, I beat them here!" She checked herself abruptly, fearing that she had betrayed too much emotion.

Two men entered the opening and stopped not far from where Norton and Mary stood.

"She came this way, all right. I watched her, and

saw that she turned back across the valley after it got dark."

One of the men crouched close to the ground examining something in the loose dirt which had attracted his attention.

"See here, Jack; this is the track of a horse, and it's coming down. But there are none below, so it must have turned back." Both men crouched along the trail examining the prints critically. "She's met him all right, and they've gone up the mountain." Both men swore savagely at their ill luck.

"They've gone to the lower pass, and it's up to us to get there first. Gad! It may be we can bag the two of them. What d'ye think of that, Jack?"

"If we don't the other fellows will," the other replied.

"But we want the reputation of doing that. This has been a devilish hard climb, and I don't propose to make it for nothing."

"I'd like to get him in my hands, curse him! The thing would have gone through all right if it hadn't been for him. The King would have coughed up the twenty thousand if he hadn't told him not to. He'll wish he'd a-stayed out of it before he gets through with us."

"That's so, Jack. And when the sheriff gets on the stand and tells what he found in his room, he'll be a pretty lonesome-looking psalm-singer, I take it. With him out of the way, we'll have another try at stealing the girl, and this time it will go. Eh, Jack?"

"Sure thing! But that chap, Baldwin, has got to be done for too. See how he talked to Tom Foster,

and then wanted to fight him. Got to do for him while we are taking care of the other chap."

"I'm rested now, and we ought to be hitting it. We must beat them to the lower pass. Never mind about Baldwin, he'll get his. The chief guy in this deal has simply got to call the trick, that's all; he knows there is no other way out for him. When we get these chaps booked, then it's for the girl again and the twenty thousand, so the big chief says, and we won't stop at the cave, either." The two men swung down the trail, and were soon beyond hearing.

Norton intended to spring upon the two villains and crush them. Once he started to raise the branches of the tree and leap out, but Mary warned him with a shake of her head.

"They are gone," he said, when the sounds had died away.

Both stepped into the trail.

"Tell me what this means, please. I understand some of it, but not all."

"It is a plot to ruin you. They claim the Junction store was robbed, also the post office, and the things which were stolen were found in your room, where some of them had placed them. A man swears he saw you take them there as you returned from visiting old man Tomkins. The sheriff came at once, and swore in several deputies from down about Senora. What you just heard shows it is all a scheme to crush you and Baldwin. There is some one at the head of this meanness, planning it all. May it please God to uncover him, whoever he may be."

For some time he stood looking at her in silence, her own glance meeting his frankly.

"Does anyone believe me guilty?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly not!" Her voice rang with indignation.

"Do the King and Baldwin believe it a plot?"

"They do."

"And the Widow Rogers and Sanders?"

"Yes."

"And you."

She started and looked at him intently. She was surprised that he could even suspect that she doubted him, and there was just a slight note of disappointment in her voice as she replied:

"I would as soon think of finding a fault in natural law as that you could steal."

Norton felt an almost irresistible desire to take her in his arms. The courage which had brought her through the night to save him conspired to kindle to a wild flame the love which had smoldered in his heart so long. By every law of a kind universe she was fitted to be his, and yet that could not be. What he suspected he dared not frame into words lest he put himself hopelessly in a false light. Then he might be wrong. In that moment he put up a silent prayer that in some way she might be spared the ruin which fate seemed to be arranging for her.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he replied, collecting himself, "for as certainly as the stars shine over us to-night, I am innocent." To know that she trusted him in the face of such damaging evidence brought a large joy to his heart.

"We must be going," she answered, recalling herself.

"Where?"

"To a place where you will not be found for a few

days, till your friends have time to ferret out the leaders in this scheme."

"No, I shall go on and face them all," he replied, decidedly.

"No, no, you must not! We would not be able to help you then, and it would lead to some tragedy, for Baldwin has made a vow that the ring shall not crush you, even if he has to take matters into his own hands, and you know he will keep his word."

"I have never turned back from any man," he persisted.

"But you could not clear yourself in a court composed of your enemies, all of whom are in a scheme to crush you. No, you must not return to the valley just yet. You are to remain in hiding till we bring you word."

"Never!" he cried, almost fiercely.

"But you will!" she answered in a voice somewhat in the tone he had just used. "I obeyed you once when I didn't want to, and you must mind me now. You owe it to your friends to consider their wishes and feelings in the matter."

This was glorious, charming! He loved her before; he adored her now. He broke into laughter. "You put it strong," he replied. "I want to do what is best —for those who are trying to help me."

"Then follow my plans."

"Would you please state them?"

"Simply this: There is a hermit living over in a wooded cañon, and not many know where his cabin is situated. It chanced that my father did him a kindness once which seems to have placed the old man under lasting obligations. Sometimes I go that way

and take him reading matter and word from the outside. He is very queer, but a good man. You can stay there till you hear from the valley. We must be going." She turned toward the grove where the horses were tied, and a minute later was leading up the pass at a swift pace.

The trail wound over lofty ridges and down into fathomless cañons. Once at the bottom, it twisted through glades where streams went swiftly over granite beds, and deer leaped aside to watch them from tall, brown mint.

At last they entered a small valley, fenced with high hills. At the center stood the hermit's cabin.

"This is the place," she said, as he rode up beside her.

"I shall expect to hear the bellowing of bloodhounds on my trail, and the cheering of the man-hunters at any time. Really, it does seem queer to play the criminal. I remember that Robert the Bruce had such an experience, however, and that is royal consolation."

"It is an elfin spot, and you will be perfectly safe here. I will arouse the old man. He will come out complaining, and it will not be the first time. I often come this way at night to hear him storm at my queer habits of going about in the dark."

Riding close to the door, she struck it repeatedly with her whip. A dog barked inside, and then a man's voice called for quiet. A moment later he thrust his head through the partly opened door demanding what was wanted.

"It is I, Mary Morrison, Mr. Reaves; I want to talk to you. Come out."

"Yes, yes, Mary Morrison! I see, I see. At your old tricks, disturbing the owls and honest men when you should be at home in bed. It is not the first time you have spoiled a night's sleep for me. Come around my cabin playing the ghost and then go away laughing at my sputtering. More respect for an old man, more respect, I say. Play your pranks on some one who does not need his rest as I do."

"Hurry and come out, Mr. Reaves. I have important business with you," she insisted.

"Yes, yes; be there in a minute, Miss Morrison—be there in a minute."

Within that time the hermit came fussing from the door.

"I say, I say, Miss Morrison, what can you want of an old man at this hour of the night? Well, well, not alone, I see; not alone. Who is it, may I ask?"

"Mr. Norton; my father's friend. He will stay with you for a while. Ask no questions; it is all right."

"Yes, yes, anything I can do for King Morrison, or his friends, will be counted a privilege. Now, let me see. Norton, Norton. Seems to me I have heard that name before. A late arrival in the Silver Bow?"

"Rather; only two years, or about that."

"I see, I see. You are most welcome to the home of the hermit. There is good pasture at the rim of the meadow; care for your horse and come in."

The old man hobbled back through the door as Mary threw him a cheery good-night.

"I will walk as far as the edge of the clearing with you," Norton said, coming to her side.

They passed on in silence for a short distance, then he turned to her with a question:

A MEETING ON THE TRAIL

"Do you have any idea how long I shall have to stay here."

"We hope only a few days. You will have to be patient. It is a lovely spot, and Mr. Reaves is very interesting. He knows the secrets of the wild as few men do. Keep a close watch, and we will bring you word as soon as possible."

"It goes hard to run when one is innocent, and if Baldwin fails in his efforts to uncover this thing, I shall return and take matters in my own hands. I am yielding to you this once, but not for long."

"You must promise me right here and now not to leave this spot till we tell you to. Do you promise?"

"Yes, till then." He raised his hand and she placed hers in it with a slight hesitating motion. "Safe journey home, and my deepest gratitude for your great service to me," he said, releasing it after a brief pressure.

"Good night," she said in a low voice.

"Good night," he answered. Then she was gone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

IN WHICH THERE IS A DISCOVERY

BALDWIN turned every one to account in his efforts to uncover the plot which threatened to crush his friend. Sanders he sent to the rival valley disguised as a miner. Blake and Bowers watched the lower trails, and Painter and Tank Campbell had business in Senora. The Miner and himself watched the Junction, for he was convinced that the store was a gathering place for members of the gang.

From Mary they learned of the safety of the Guide, and because the plot had failed for the time being, he was sure the leaders would come together to plan.

In the rear of the store there was a small room which opened into a back passageway. Games of chance had been carried on there before Guber started his saloon, and the place was known to those who had taken part in such doings.

A strip of forest came close up at the back of the rambling line of houses, and from here Baldwin and his companion kept their nightly watch. To this place they came for a week before their vigilance was rewarded. Both had begun to fear that their suspicion was not well founded, when they were aroused by the appearance of two men, moving twin smudges between the houses. The actions of the intruders showed that they were apprehensive of danger, for they avoided

making any sound and paused often to listen. A little later the whine of a door came to their ears, and they knew the men had entered the house.

Just back of the gaming room was another, used to store the surplus commodities of the place. The partition between the two was of the most careless sort. The boards, which had been put up with little regard for a fit, had dried, leaving ample cracks through which all that was happening inside could be seen.

Baldwin and the Miner entered the storeroom and crept to the partition. A smoky lamp in the other chamber cast a half light which revealed imperfectly what was happening. Richard DuMont was in earnest conversation with the Hunchback, and another whom they did not recognize.

"I tell you, Hunchy, we've got to extend our plans. That fellow, Baldwin, must be taken in too, for he is preventing our scheme from working out. He has stationed his men on the trails and at Senora, and he has succeeded in turning that hypocrite back—curse him! I could roast them both with fire, and if I ever get them in my hands I'll do it to a turn, remember that."

"I believe you, Dick," chuckled the Hunchback.

"Have a care, you deformity, or I'll twist you worse than you are," growled DuMont.

"No offense, Dick, no offense, you know."

"O, that's all right, Hunch, what I want to know is this: Will you play your part in the scheme which I have to propound? Mind what you say, for I have you in my power. Are you with us, Hunchy?"

The dwarf winced and turned pale.

"Yes, yes, I'm with you; but we must get things in better shape or it'll be the last card with us all, as sure as two fives make a ten spot."

"Leave that to us, Hunchy. I'll be back to-morrow night with the whole thing worked out. We'll land the two of them in the same net before the game ends. I'll come to-morrow evening with some other members of the gang, so just keep mum, understand, and be ready to do what you are told. One word from your warped mouth and I'll kill you as I would a snake, for I've staked all on this throw. At this time we will be here. Better close your store so there will be no loungers hanging around. Take care, for those dogs are on the watch."

The three men rose and the Hunchback put out the light. DuMont and his companion crept through the passage and disappeared among the buildings. Waiting till there was no danger of discovery, Baldwin and the Miner crossed the belt of darkness and entered the forest. There they gripped hands.

"At last, thank heaven!" said Baldwin fervently. "Going to take me in too. Well, well, I think I'll be in that game, Mr. DuMont. Both in the same net—burned with fire—to a turn—that chap is a murderer and a rascallion."

"There will be lively times at the Junction to-morrow night, or I can't tell the signs of the times, and I mean to have at least one hand in the fun," commented the Miner with a chuckle.

"The fish in that net may be those who do not expect to be caught, eh, Barns?"

"Right you are, sonny. And it won't be the first time rascals have been taken in the traps they set for

others. That's the way Frenchie and his gang got fooled over on the Black Sand."

Going to their horses they mounted and rode away. A mile up the valley a man galloped in from the hills and crossed their course.

"Hello, Alex! Is that you?" called Baldwin, recognizing the lank rider.

"Hey, Scotty! What you doin' out at this time of night? Give an account of yourself."

"We've got the whole thing in our hands. Pull the trap to-morrow night. Want you to go for the Guide. Have him in the valley by noon, but mind you don't come by any of the old trails. Make a way of your own through the thickets, and don't fail to be here."

A full account of what had happened followed, and Sanders declared that he would not miss having a hand in the fun for six of the best ranches on the Silver Bow.

As the dawn broke over the Mountain Land, Baldwin was in the saddle. Messengers were dispatched to Bowers and the watchers on the trails. Here and there a word was dropped which would keep the ranchmen and riders where they could be found, though Baldwin did not mention what his plans were. He had not told anyone that Richard DuMont was one of those in the room; for reasons of his own he wished to keep that for the time. Later in the day he rode to the Morrison Ranch, and communicated what he had learned.

"You must both come—remember, both of you. Mary has worked hard to uncover this villainy and she should have part in the breaking up of the gang."

The King hesitated. "Why is it necessary that my daughter should go, Baldwin?"

"It is not just necessary, but I wish she would. I feel it is her due to be at the finish of the thing."

"What are your wishes, Mary?"

"I want to go, father. Witnesses may be needed, and besides, I want to have part in the play, as Scotty says."

"Very well, then. You usually work your old father, you little despot, and this is no exception to the rule." The King looked at his daughter with a twinkle in his eye, and received a smart lecture in return which ended by Mary tangling her fingers in his whiskers and pulling them in mock severity.

Night came again, cool and soft of sandal. The touch of the dusk seemed to woo away the fevers of the world with the wordless gospel of peace. Yet, not everywhere was this true, for as Baldwin watched the purple fading from the peaks, he knew that the darkness would bring scenes in which fierce passions would flame and wild anger take possession of men.

Midnight was still several hours away when he moved toward the place of meeting. Alone at the rendezvous he waited impatiently for the coming of his companions. A low wind passed through the tree tops. A rabbit hopped close to him, sat up, its ears and body quivering, then limped away. Baldwin was wondering what Mary would do when she made the discovery of DuMont's guilt. There had been no doubt of it in his own mind for some time.

He was glad for the revelation which awaited her, for it would be her emancipation from a life-long misery. When he first came to the valley she was only

a slip of a girl, graceful as a young spruce, and coy as an antelope. Since then, he had seen her develop into perfect womanhood, warm with every feminine charm. Many times they had passed over the trails together, up the winding hogbacks, down twisting, endless slopes into dreamy, sunlit valleys. They had been good friends after the camaraderie of the Mountain Land. She had scolded him when he displeased her, praised him in his riding feats, and looked to him for protection when the border frays were on between the valleys.

The King and Mary arrived early, and half an hour later, Norton and Alex Sanders came, followed by the Miner. Tank Campbell came at the last moment, and was kept from talking with some difficulty. In a short time a group of forms passed between the houses, the sound of the door telling that they had entered the store.

One by one the watchers followed. Baldwin had warned Mary that all depended on silence, and had been quietly assured that she would make no sound. She had wondered vaguely at this, but asked no question. Once in the storeroom, each crept to an opening. Baldwin saw Mary start as her face came into the slice of light and her glance rested on the dark face of Richard DuMont. The lamp burned dimly enough over the occupants of the room. DuMont was speaking:

"As I said last night, Hunchy, we must land Baldwin as well as the fanatic. They have thwarted my plans once; they shall not do so again. The time is short now and I *must* make it go. The old dog would have done as I advised and plunked down the twenty

thousand if it hadn't been for them, and I should have had plenty to take me and the girl to Europe. That amount would last me till the old man dies and then the law will give the property to the girl, and I'd have it all after that."

"Why don't you take the girl and then wait till the old chap goes over the range? That's one way to get a slice," suggested the Hunchback.

"That's my business, Hunchy; keep your nose out. It all went well enough till that fanatic came. Wait till I get him in my hands! But I need money. I've played this game for a long time, and now it's got to go through. With these fellows behind bars, or at the ends of ropes, the old dog will come across with the money quick enough. It all looks good to me. I'll have the girl and my share, and you chaps can wipe out old scores and get pay for it. Then it's to other lands for me, with piles of money later on. Gad! what do you think of that?"

"Wish I could cut you out, Dick," said a man half hidden in a corner.

"You can't do that, Tom Foster, if you are sheriff of this county, with a hundred thieves to divide with you. I'm the solid man in that quarter. She adores me, and bends to my will without question."

"Dick's the Antony of this queendom," said another.

"But what's your plan?" put in the Hunchback, who was not enjoying his part in the schemes of the men who showed an open contempt for him.

DuMont leaned toward him. "That's as simple as you please. Last summer a fellow who has it in for this man Baldwin conceived the idea of putting a piece

of silver under a steer's hide, and then branded the animal with a cold iron, putting Baldwin's brand over it. Then he turned the animal into Baldwin's herd, and it's there now. All we have to do is produce the steer, show the coin and the brand-blotting and we have him. But to make his guilt doubly sure we want you to mark a quantity of coin, and this is to be found in the chap's pockets by the sheriff after you have declared another robbery. To-morrow is trading day for the ranchmen, and you are to get that money off on him. Understand?"

"Very good, very good! But what am I to get for this work?"

"The same as we paid you for putting the goods in his trunk. When we make the old man come through you will get more. Now get busy, for our plans must not fail this time. Don't worry, Hunchy; I'll see that you get something out of it, all right. I'll marry the girl, show these chaps how a gentleman can behave. We'll spend our winters in the East and come here for the summer. Bah! it's as good as in my hands now."

"You wouldn't marry her if she knew this, Dick, I'll bet ten head of beef steers," bantered the sheriff.

"But she doesn't know it, see?" DuMont rose to his feet. "We must be going; there is much to do. See that Baldwin gets the marked coin and we'll do the rest. As to the other fellow: it's only a matter of time till he falls into our hands, and when he does"—DuMont leaned toward the others with an evil glare in his eyes—"he'll learn that Richard DuMont knows how to take a full measure of vengeance."

The silent watchers had heard every word distinctly,

The men drew together and conversed in whispers. It was instantly agreed to burst in upon the villains and make them prisoners. In a half voice came the one word, "Ready," and the door of the inner room was sent crashing from its hinges, and the next instant the surprised conspirators were in line, their hands high above their heads.

"Jest keep your eye on them gents while I gits some rope," said Campbell, heaving off a board and entering the store. He was back in a minute with enough to secure them all.

"Take their weapons from them," said Norton, in a voice which had the ring of steel in it.

Baldwin stepped forward to accomplish this, but was resisted by DuMont, who stood blanched with rage and fear. The hand which closed on his throat left no doubt of what he could expect if he did not obey, and he yielded with a muttered oath. The man's face was a study. Mingled rage and defeat left his skin a ghastly purple. For him all was over, and what fate might await him he could only guess. Before him stood the woman he had deceived and wronged, her eyes filled with a wondering disgust. He writhed in agony. Norton looked at Mary. She stood with her eyes fastened on the face of the man who sought to avoid the blistering touch of her glance. Then she spoke:

"I heard every word, Richard DuMont! I shall not express what I feel of contempt and loathing for you. I pity you for the abject wretch you are." She threw the ring at his feet and turned away. As she did so her eyes met Norton's and he saw the banners of indignation flying in them.

A DISCOVERY

A council was held and it was decided to call the ranchmen and riders together. All were more or less involved, and they should have a chance to help decide the matter.

"That strikes me as the proper thing," said Sanders. "You hold the birds, and by sunrise I'll have the upper valley here." The next minute the clatter of horse's feet told them that the ranger was away on his mission.

"You knew he would be here?" Mary looked at Baldwin half reprovingly.

"Yes. Was it wrong in me? I wanted you to hear for yourself."

"No, I am glad!" Her voice was low and vibrant with joy.

"I suspicioned him always."

"And you did not tell me?"

"No, it was not just the thing, seeing that your plans seemed to be made."

"I know now I should never have gone with him. Someway, the fear and disgust which had come to me would have found a way to harden in my soul, and I should have refused—I know—at last."

As Mary rode homeward through the gray dawn she met many men galloping in the direction of the Junction. When the sun rose a hundred ranchmen and riders were assembled. The King stated briefly all that had happened.

"We wanted you to have a say in what should be done. There is no justice in the courts of this section; this is clearly proved by the fact that the sheriff of the county is a thief, and member of a gang of thieves. What shall be done with these men."

"Hang 'em all!" shouted Tank Campbell, and it was repeated on every side.

"I think the Guide should have something to say as to that, seeing he has been the object of this conspiracy. Over in the church we have not been taught to kill," said Baldwin, pushing to the front.

"I am against taking their lives," said Norton firmly.

"Thirty lashes and certain death if they are found in the valley after three hours," called a voice from the crowd.

"Good! The very thing!" came back in a chorus.

The King drew a mark in the dust. "All who say this shall be the penalty cross this line to my side." There was a stampede over it.

The prisoners were brought out, and with arms stretched above their heads forced to endure the painful and humiliating verdict. Scorning to ask for any mitigation of his sentence, Richard DuMont endured it without a word, though those who watched were sure Big Steeve, who volunteered to apply the lash, put unusual force into the blows when it came to him. The Hunchback was let off with a suspended sentence, provided he would give the names of all connected with the gang, a thing he made haste to do. He was also diligent to carry out the rest of the things required of him, one of which was that he be found missing after one day. This time was given him to dispose of his business, which he did by knocking it down to Alex Sanders, who declared that he was getting too old to follow the trail much longer.

The conspirators were led to the hills, given their horses, and told to vanish forever from that locality

on pain of death. That night, twenty determined men crossed the range, but found the nest empty. In some way word had reached the gang, and they had fled to return no more.

Taking those aside who had staked all to save him, Norton said all that was in his heart, nor did he feel shame for the mist which gathered to his eyes as he held the strong hands of each man in a grip which said more than words.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE UNSEEN HAND

NORTON'S trips took him over vast stretches of the Mountain Land. The discovery of new mines brought together the drifting elements, and towns sprang up as by magic, with every feature of lawless sin. Saloons and gambling dens stirred their stews to a hell broth, and the graveyards grew larger under the pines.

At night he made his camp in some glade where the whispering hemlocks gave a shelter with their long branches. There, stretched in his lean-to before a fire, he slept. Eating the scant provisions which he carried in the pouches of his saddle and drinking from the streams, he soon came to think little of hardships which others might consider unendurable. Wolves prowled about him in the darkness, their lank forms showing wraithlike at the edge of the dark. From these wilderness inns he would depart with the first glint of day.

One morning, when a white mist rose from the river, and the marshes sent forth a bracing smell, Norton left Dan in the stall, and climbed the mountain beyond the cañon to a little mesa some hundreds of feet above the valley. There, he threw himself on the ground at full length and turned his eyes to the phantasmal world below. On this morning, all the winds were still, and slope and glade bizarre. A blue peace seemed to encompass the hills like a personality.

THE UNSEEN HAND

Norton lay with half-closed eyes seeing it all dreamily. He watched the mists as they rose from the river melt into the amorous sunshine.

But his mind was busy with other things just now. He was thinking of the meaning and mystery of life, of pain and tears. He did not doubt that these were parts of the schooling which brings the soul to its best, but there was so much of longing mingled with the things of the passing days that he came to wish that he might draw back the curtain and look with open face on the meaning of it all. As for himself, he was but a bubble on some tumbling stream which rolled to a boundless sea. That the shores of that ocean were washed with peace he had no doubt. But he was not there yet, and here in his present sphere there was hope deferred and—love.

The word roused him. Love! The thought of it, as it burned like an altar flame in his breast for the one woman in the world for him, swept all the commonplace things out of his life, and he felt himself exalted in the strength and purity of it. And yet, what was it to mean to him? Here was another mystery, where fingers wrote upon a wall with the body unseen and unknown.

A jumble of memories swept over him and with them visions of lost faces—faces of comrades at the old Alma Mater, and the features of shapeless girls who had thought him good to look upon. And then that other face, with its haunting beauty. With the thought of Mary, he looked across the valley to where smoke rose over the ranch house.

But why did he trouble his heart? Love for DuMont she had never felt, he knew that now, but there

was another. Norton reasoned it pro and con. They had been comrades of the trails when Mary was but a slender thing. And he loved her, this brave, dashing rider; how could it be otherwise? It had been fear which kept him from declaring his feelings, and while he waited, woman-like, she had called him by a move which threatened to take her from him forever.

No, she was not for him, Norton told himself, this strange creature with the sun-bright hair. What he had seen the day of the chase told him that Baldwin and Mary were intended for each other. With an effort he shook off the haunting wish of his soul, and the dream crumbled into formless thought; that state in which the mind rests from the scorch of things which trouble it.

There were other matters for his heart to cogitate. He had been very busy in his work. There had been long nights spent with sick men in their cabins, and wearisome trips by trail and stream. Out of it all had come a feeling of obligation, and he had gone forth with a face which caught the light of other worlds.

Yet there had been that other call which came from within; proving that there were two centers of feeling, one in God, the other in the breast of woman, and Norton was conscious that one could not be complete without the other.

He was recalled by a step, and turning, he saw Baldwin enter the glade. Without a word he threw himself down beside Norton, and turned toward him with a little movement of impatience. It was plain that there was something on his mind.

"Well?" Norton pitched the word to a question.

"You won't think me crazy, will you?"

"I will understand, Baldwin. Go ahead."

"You have sure been a guide to me ever since that time you gave me the lesson I needed. I have been thinking about that a great deal of late, wondering what would have been the end of some of us fellows if you had never come to the valley." He paused and ran his fingers through a tuft of bunch grass with a caressing movement.

"I hope it has been some help to you."

"It has. Look at old Jed Anderson, and Tank Campbell, and Jack Mullens, with the Miner and a lot more. Yes, and Jenny Mallow, and—and—Mary Morrison. They are all changed. Besides, that dive of Guber's has been run out. It is great, I tell you—great!"

"Our lives can never utterly fail if we live unselfishly, I am convinced."

"That's so, Guide. And I have been thinking that you came here without being asked. The fact is, we didn't want you, but you came anyway, for something else brought you, and that's what I like best about this whole thing."

Norton refrained from replying and the rider went on:

"I heard you say once at the Big Willow that to properly take this trail one had to give himself to it completely, rope, saddle, and all. Now, I take it that you were correct in that statement."

"I was."

"I remember that you said something about the visits of the sun so many times in the year, and that all his light was poured out unselfishly with not a ray

kept back, and that the snow and rain threw themselves away to make the streams, and the grass gave itself to feed something. I never forgot that, and I have come to talk to you on that line to-day."

"Go on," Norton prompted, dropping his hand over the rider's for a brief time.

"Well, if that is true, then we must be that way. That is the thing which has been making me think hard. If I am to follow out that lesson, it means the last ounce weighed out as God weighs the grass and the rain?"

"Exactly."

"Well, I came to tell you that this thing has been spoiling my sleep for a week."

"I am not surprised at that, Scotty."

"You understand what I mean, Guide?"

"Yes, I have been expecting it."

"You have? I confess I am rather doubtful."

"I am not. You understand, I lost sleep once myself."

"There is help in that. But I want you to get me straight in this, if you can,"

"As far as I am able to go, I will."

"You see, it has been put up to me this way: This is a large country, and no one man can cover it without killing himself from overwork. Well, that is what has been troubling me, and—and—O, confound it, Guide! Can't you help me out?"

Baldwin sprang to his feet, and stood with folded arms, his face flushed. Norton got up also.

"I have been expecting this, Scotty, and I'll help you all I can."

"What can a fellow like me do?"

"What you are told."

"But I don't know how to speak correctly, and I'm not cut out for this line, I'm afraid."

"Remember, there is no infallible grammarian. Authorities quote each other for mistakes. You will come along all right on that line, I am sure."

"You'll help me out, and show me where I can improve?"

"Certainly. All my books are at your disposal."

"Then I'll try, though I am a poor one for such a work. You don't imagine that I may be mistaken, Guide?"

"I don't think so. How did you come to feel you ought to help me out?"

"Why, something got hold of me, and began to say: 'If you think men ought to hear such things, go and tell them yourself.' I laughed at the idea at first, but the thing has got me solid and I can't shake it off, so I came over here to talk to you, for I can't rest till I get it settled."

"I am certain that if you permit this impression to lead you, it will bring you to prosperity of conscience, and that is worth much. There is a place for every stout heart to lift, and—well, it would be good to have a fellow like you share my coat and lean-to by the trail. I confess it has seemed heavy sometimes, this load of helping unfortunate men, and—yes, sometimes I have been lonesome. I guess you would call it that."

"That part of it would be fine. But the whole valley will think I have lost my mind. The boys will say I am batty, for about all I know is the trail and the things of the hills. Yet, I have never thought that

the drive and the horse were the best things in life, for I was not taught that way—I had a good mother." The rider's voice broke.

"Don't think of yourself at all. You have the talent, and there are great heights you can reach by applying yourself. You have courage and a splendid appearance, let me say so frankly, and these go far. But let me ask if you have thoroughly counted the cost in this matter, for this life is not all roses."

"I think I have, Guide, as well as I know how."

"Suppose it would mean the loss of friends—dear friends; what then?"

"I have gone over that." The fine eyes did not waver, and Norton's held a strange resignation as he put the question.

"But suppose the scorn and jeers of men should come?"

"I've thought of that."

Baldwin was feeling for Norton's hand, and found it. For a moment they stood looking into each other's eyes, strong as young pines, handsome as Apollos. The glory of God seemed to fill the mountains and they were exalted in it. The exaltations of ennobling purposes made them clean. It was another scene of transfiguration without tabernacles, and their garments were white and wonderful. The trees seemed to cease whispering that they might witness this selah in two lives. Then they went down the trail together—down into the wonderful magical world of visions and crosses.

The days passed. Autumn slowly put out her fires in the wood, and nothing remained but heaps of ashes where faded leaves piled her once blazing hearths.

THE UNSEEN HAND

The snow came at last in whirling clouds, and the winds swept with shrieks of anarchy over the white waste. But before the passes were choked with drifts, Norton and Baldwin made several trips to distant camps carrying packs of reading matter, and good cheer in their messages. The miners welcomed them to their fires, and shared their rude fare with them. Once the rider had settled it, he wavered not. Often night found them on the trails in the depths of world-old forests. Side by side they slept under the shelter of lean-tos on couches of pine branches. Drenched with sleet and aggravated with hunger, they were often days in the open before the door of a friendly cabin was reached.

At last the horses were left in the stall, and the trips made on snowshoes.

Down the vast divides, Norton and his companion glided like winged creatures across the white miles. Once they were trailed by cougars, the lean beasts following them with cries which were almost human. At another time the wolves swarmed on their trail and the mountains crashed to the sound of the battle which left a dozen gray forms on the snow. After this fashion the days and weeks passed; the sun swung farther up the sky, and the air grew warmer. From the west came a soft Chinook wind and the snow shrank from it. Soon the spring would return, bringing the land its resurrection of flowers and song.

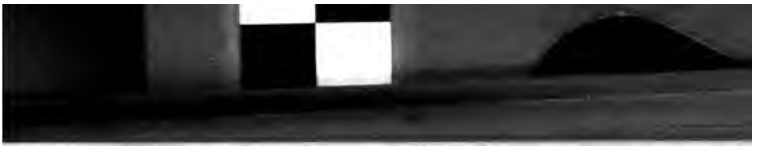
CHAPTER XXX

BUILDING A DREAM

It all came to Norton that first night when he sat with Mrs. Rogers on the front porch.

He had not mentioned it to anyone—nevertheless, from that time he had made the reconciliation of the valleys the great object of his life. The hope that he might be able to accomplish this had been to him as a fair dream. Yet, as he looked the matter over, he was forced to admit that the fulfillment of his desires seemed as far off as ever. Perhaps it never could be done. Still, he would not give up, for to yield was not a trait of his disposition.

There had been much to alienate him from the other valley, and the people of that region had not been backward in making him feel this. The fact that he lived in the Silver Bow neighborhood was against him. Then, there was the fight at the Big Willow in which he had taken an active part, and, of late, the rescue of Mary Morrison, which would inevitably win for him the gratitude of her father, who was looked upon as the center of the trouble from his side. These things did not make for peace, and Norton fully realized the difficulties which confronted him. Yet as the clouds thickened about him, he squared his shoulders and raised his head with the courage of the leader born, and with set lips—lips which made no



complaint and voiced no doubt—he faced the problem and went on.

If the younger elements of the two valleys had been asked to explain the feelings of rivalry and bitterness which existed between them, very few would have been able to give a clear reason for conditions. Tradition—which has more weight in many cases than inspiration—entered into it completely. Somebody said, who heard Somebody say. So the tares flourished on a broad field as only tares can.

Being a man of courage, Norton had confidence in himself and others. He had visited the hostile section many times, doing what he could.

Twice now the snow had covered the Mountain Land since he crossed the range, and twice the summer had meditated on the hills, grown old and died. That day he was a stranger, and he had ridden over the meadows with a girl, the haunting wonder of whose eyes had never left him. Since then he had passed through experiences which linked him vitally with the lives and manners of the people, and his feet stood in an even place.

The days of winds and whirling drifts were gone; the spring had returned, and the flowers foamed along the land. Everywhere there was the babbling of streams which had taken the land in a silver net.

On a quiet afternoon in mid-May, Norton rode toward the southern hills. He was filled with a strange peace as he went on over bordering meadows and under leafing cottonwoods. The tang of earth-smells was good, and the blue of the distant ranges brought back the old hunger to melt into their meshy depths

and be lost. The kneeling slopes at the rim of the valley were like congregations of worshipers bowing at the altars of Beauty.

To Norton it was the old charm come back—the deathless passion of nature which had taken him to her breast and would not let him go. Such was life: a crash of winter gales, a howl of storms; after which came tender Mays blending into amorous Junes, with restoration and reward. The passing of days was a voyage. Like clouds, brave souls went down the years into the unknown.

With such thoughts as these, Norton left the valley and plunged into the forest. Already the mountains were casting their shadows, for the day was drawing to a close.

Norton bared his head and drank the air. He was restless and hungry at heart. The soul has three rooms—one for Purity, one for the love of woman, and the other for the presence of the Divine. In each of these there are an altar and kneeling cherubim. In Norton's breast two rooms were occupied, while the third waited with clean flame for the coming of its worshiper. The number "three" is the complete sum: the Triune God, the body, soul, and spirit; and a man, a bride, and child. This is the sum of the universe.

As he rode on he felt the old want return, and the love which he could not cast out of his life went with him and lay upon his heart.

As night fell he crossed the summit and dropped down to the headwaters of a stream which he knew must empty into the rival valley. Passing a place where there were many loose stones, Dan slipped and

sprained his knee and could proceed no farther. Under the face of a cliff Norton built a fire and arranged his camp. After making a lean-to he sat down to eat a scant lunch and watch the gathering stars.

The night wind filtered through the pines with a sound which was very sad. Wild things came into the circle of light and watched him curiously. He wondered if the society of the wilderness knew the restless yearning which men experience. If they did not, why were their trails so many and their cries so weird?

Rising, he walked down the glade fenced with young trees. The moon slept on the hemlocks, and the laurel's breath was good. If Norton had tried to personify it, he would have done so by the figure of a sleeping virgin whose mantle was as white as snow and whose couch was pale roses.

At the side of the cañon he came to the edge of a cliff, beneath which the blue fir woods stood very tall and still. A shelf of the rock offered him a seat. The forest covered the land like a ragged coat with here and there the gray-white of granite showing through a rent where some elemental struggle had bared the cosmic breast. For hours he sat drinking impressions as the air takes in the mist. Time and Chance, Hope, Love, and Longing brought their sacred books and spread them upon his hands, and he read from them with the eyes of a seer.

Life was full of cross-purposes; it was impossible to see far. On the other side of the mist before him he knew there were peaks and storm-breaking rocks. Once, when the sun shone very clear, he had seen them, their mighty outlines set against the sky. In

this manner he explained the baffling things of reason and experience.

Still he did not feel like complaining. Life was good, service was worth while. Graceful things stood up, brave and tall about him. The moon was like the passing of spirits. There was scripture in the stars. Yet, he was aware of a lack in his life. He raised his eyes to a tall pine, and tried to frame its moaning into words. He smiled at the fanciful result, for it seemed the sounds merged into the name he had come to love.

"It does seem as if it spells out 'Mary'," he mused. "O girl, if you only understood! But you don't, you can't, and none shall ever know." He turned to the sunken land below him. Never before did the white glory of love seem so good. He was conscious of being very grateful for something to love. He wondered if that were greater than being loved. He had begun to understand that every great love is a great martyrdom; the best things in life came by loss as well as by possession. The rabble at the Place of a Skull had spoken better than they knew: He could not save others and save himself. Motherhood, bread-winning, leadership, all demanded a great surrender. And yet there was that other side to it. Motherhood had its children, out of the hand came bread, and the leader rejoiced in his victory. He bowed his face in his hands for a long time, but his lips framed no sound.

Rising, he stood up against the night. With a little movement of impatience he threw the mood from him. Nothing should make him weak now. If all he felt for Mary Morrison were to prove an empty dream,

he would yet pursue his way without a murmur. Out of the mesh of mist and moon seemed to stretch vapory hands which beckoned him on. He would follow their leading and leave the rest to the workings of life's law.

When he returned to camp the fire had died away, and the wind had risen in the hemlocks; in it there was a keenness like the tang of the sea. Some leaves which had hung all winter came rustling to the ground, postscripts of nature which read out of meaning in the May season. He was aware that the wind had a different note than earlier in the evening: there was a premonition of storm—or accident.

Heaping the fire with logs, he wrapped himself in a blanket and, stretching himself in the lean-to, was soon asleep.

CHAPTER XXXI

WHAT AN ILL WIND BLEW

NORTON awoke next morning with a hissing sound in his ears. He started up to find himself in a whirl of snow. The storm was one of those after-thoughts of nature which seem to be necessary to maintain the poise of some law, without which the books of the universe would not balance.

Many inches of the fluff covered the land. The branches of the young firs drooped as if struck with death, and all evidence of his fire was gone. A weird moaning came out of the forest. He rose and pushed away the snow, after which he built a fire. When he had eaten what remained of his food, he led Dan up and examined his leg. It was badly swollen, and the horse limped painfully. There was nothing for it but to turn the animal back toward the valley and proceed on foot.

After drawing the cinch tight he dashed off a note which he deposited in one of the bags and started the animal up the trail. The horse would make his way back to the stall, there was no doubt of that. Then Norton went down the mountain with long, determined strides.

The glades were vaultlike from the thickness of the powdery element, and he found it difficult to breathe. When he touched branches of trees they shook over him their weight of snow and regained a natural posi-

tion. From everywhere came that sound of filtering sleet which is like the passing of the hand over paper. He was constantly tripping over roots and falling into holes. Once he passed too close to a brawling stream and was precipitated into it. He slipped from smooth stones and clambered over fallen trees, or became entangled in meshes of vines. But with that determination which was one of the elements of his nature he set his jaw and plunged on.

Noon found him in a more level country where the trees stood up like titans. There the wind came only in whirling currents, and the bite was missing. All the bad gods were abroad—the gods who sleep under the falls and conjure the storms. Mighty winds lifted up their voices along the hills, and the forest groaned as if dealt a blow.

Norton fancied that the natures of the trees were to be seen in the way they bore up against the storm. Thickets of young firs stood mutually sullen, while individual ones seemed to despair and drooped hopelessly. Not so the tall cottonwoods along the streams; these lifted their long arms like praying prophets. He fancied that men acted very much the same under test. After all, there was something splendid in feeling the slap of the storm in his face, and taking the fist of the wind on his forehead without complaint. With set teeth he bore up, and soon broke into the sweat which put every muscle at its best.

Suddenly the creek which he was following slipped down the face of a rock into a cañon with low, sloping walls. Another water course came in from the right and the united streams plunged along the stony bed. The dip of the land told Norton that he was in the

lower breaks where the hill country bent down to the valley, yet he could form no definite idea of the distance which lay between him and the ranches of the cattlemen.

Rounding a point of rock, he entered a glade where he paused suddenly; something had crossed it from the left not long before. A glance at the tracks showed him that they were those of a man, and that he was either bewildered or exhausted—perhaps both—for the trail wound in and out among the trees in a shambling, aimless way. Some storm-bound traveler was making for the valley also.

Norton hurried forward to overtake the man, for when exhausted, death comes soon to one in such a condition. Sometimes the trail went straight on; again it turned back and crossed itself, till it ended on the sheltered side of a small tree out of which Norton dragged an old man who looked at him with wild, frightened eyes. His beard and brows were crusted with sleet. Cold and weariness had done their work, for his knees knocked together and he seemed unable to speak.

Norton's first thought was to make a fire, but when he examined his matches, he found them wet from the plunge into the stream. For a time he was at a loss to know what to do. It was evident the man could not walk, and to remain in the storm in his condition was certain death.

"Who are you?" he asked, steadying the old man on his feet.

"Hickland."

Norton started at the sound.

"Are you lost?"

"No."

"How did you come to be out in this storm?"

"Was crossing the range from one of my ranches—had to camp—horse got away."

"How far is it to the valley?"

"Several miles."

"Can you walk?"

"No; I've gone as far as I can. I'm—an—old—man."

Norton saw that the ranchman had spoken the truth, and that if he was to be kept from freezing something must be done at once. There seemed only one thing to do—the man would have to be carried. Once it became clear that such was the proper course, Norton did not hesitate. Taking off his coat, he wrapped the ranchman in it; then with the rope which Hickland had carried in hopes of finding his horse, Norton made a loop which he threw around his shoulders arranged so it would hold the burden of the man's body, and without a moment's hesitation lifted him onto his back. The next minute he was plunging ahead with the snow well up to his knees.

As the forest grew less dense, the bellowing winds came keen and cold, the particles of ice cutting the face like bits of glass.

Norton realized that the supreme test of his energies had come, and he bore up with set jaw and determined purpose. In spite of his great strength, however, his shoulders ached and his face streamed sweat. Fallen trees impeded his path, and tangles of vines tripped his feet. Over and over, he was compelled to rest, but at each of these periods the shivering of the ranchman told him that he must not delay. Then his

teeth would come together with a click and he would go on, till exhaustion forced him to stop again.

To Norton it seemed that the world through which he was passing was given over to the chaos and fiends —there was a maliciousness in the air which whined of ill. The wolf packs of the blizzard ran high, and the moan in the forest seemed to mock him with his weakness. He seemed so small, so impotent in the midst of the unchained fury.

In his overwrought condition Norton found it easy to imagine the limbless pines with eyes watching a strange creature passing with a gruesome burden on its back. They seemed to have become interested in weighing the chances of the thing which struggled, and found them many to one that the man and his burden would be destroyed by the dragonish wilderness.

The smother was terrible. He drew his breath in gasps, and the sleet chilled his lungs. In sheltered places he took time to rest, but these spells were always brief, for the groaning burden which he carried drove him on relentlessly. Then, he dreaded the coming of night. If it was difficult to make headway with an open path, what would it be when he could not see? To all appearances he was still some distance from the valley, for the ridges broke down abruptly, and the streams went with white rage over their stony beds.

As he battled his way through the whirl Norton was conscious that his strength was slowly waning. It was growing harder to keep himself erect, and his muscles ached horribly. Once he plunged into a hole, made by the burning out of some forest monarch in a forgotten fire. It was many minutes before he got out

and went on, and when he did he found the effort had reduced his nerve force very much. When he rested now there was less haste in starting out again. He began to wonder if he would be able for the task. He had carried a burden of two hundred pounds over several miles, through many inches of snow, and the task was far from ended.

Slowly a denser gloom settled over the forest. Norton knew that it would soon be dark, and that his going would be more difficult. Nevertheless, he kept doggedly to the down grade, and purposed to take his burden to shelter or perish in the attempt. Little by little the aisles of the wood faded into indistinctness, and the pools showed in their white frames like wells of ink. Yet in spite of his weariness, Norton was able to make some note of the region through which he was passing. It was suited to the storm, ragged and scarred. Then, there was something magnificent in the strength of the wind, though he was fighting step by step. At any rate, it was a worthy foe.

Darkness came at last, hungry and full of menace. For hours now, Norton had been struggling forward through almost impossible conditions. His hat had been lost early in the afternoon, and his hair was crusted with snow. The agony of his exertion was awful. Hands of fiends seemed to hunt for his breath and feel at his throat. His neck was swollen, and there was a great beating in his temples, while bubbles burst in his ears. Yet he went on.

In a little valley he came upon a large elk backed against a cliff with a dozen gray shapes leaping in front. At sight of the intruders the wolves vanished in the forest, and the elk bounded away.

With a gasp Norton sank upon a dead log to rest. Farther back it had been half a mile between stops, now it was only a few hundred yards. The spleen of winds cut him savagely and he began to feel chilly in spite of his exertions. The dip of the land was not so abrupt now. This gave him hope, for he understood that the valley could not be very far below. With great effort he was able to lift the old man once more and go on.

How he passed over those last miles, with their upleap of horror, Norton was never able to tell. He was conscious of a weariness so great that it was like to dissolution. There were terrible plunges into holes and over slippery rocks. Once he crashed down a bank among bowlders and was badly bruised. Thickets dragged the last contractions from the muscles of his body. Trees got in his way and he lunged into them; through the long stretches of the wood he staggered like one drunken. His clothes were frozen and rattled as he walked, and always there was the shivering, moaning thing on his back which recalled him and drove him on. When he tried to bring it all back afterward a great and indescribable agony, which seemed to be rending his soul, was the clearest thing in his recollection. There were scores of times when the earth came up and his hands plunged into the snow; there was also the slash of branches across his face, with the consciousness that he could not go much farther. Then out of the slithering mist there had come the glimmer of a light, and he remembered that he staggered toward it trying to cry out, but that his voice was gone. After that he was in a room which contained several men, who were talking very fast, and

there was a woman among them. Best of all, his burden was gone. Then he felt his frozen garments taken from him, and something that was steaming and good held to his lips. Then he slept, and the hours were many before he opened his eyes.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FORELOCK OF TIME

NORTON awoke to find the old ranchman moving about the house. How long he had slept he did not know, but aside from the soreness which lurked in his muscles he felt quite himself again.

He was desperately hungry, and the smell of frying bacon and coffee which came to his nostrils was good. Rising, he dressed and went into another room, where he heard some one arranging the furniture. This proved to be a woman, who came toward him extending her hand. She was bowed with years and work. Norton noticed also that she seemed to carry in her features the evidence of long and silent suffering.

"I want to tell you that you are a very strong man, and you must be a good one, for my husband would have died if you had not carried him in. You are welcome at this ranch." The woman turned abruptly back to her work as the ranchman came through the door.

"I owe you a good deal, partner?" he began, hesitatingly. "There is sure something queer about this whole thing, for who would have thought that you, the friend of old King Morrison, would save my life by bringing me in on your back? I didn't know you at first, I was too near froze for that, but I figured it all out this morning."

At this point the woman came to Norton's rescue by suggesting that he be permitted to eat before talking

further. When his appetite was satisfied, the old man took him aside and entered into earnest conversation with him. Norton saw immediately that the trend of it was along the line of what he most desired, and he encouraged his host to go on. Sitting before a blazing fire—for the chill of the storm was still in the air—the ranchman turned to him with an anxious look and led out abruptly: "I reckon you have not found it smooth sailing, young man, in your work in this country?"

"Not altogether," Norton admitted.

"And would you mind telling me what you found the hardest thing to handle?"

"The reasonless hatred which exists between the two valleys." The eyes of the old man searched Norton's face keenly, but there was no surprise in them.

"There is a lot back of that."

"Perhaps, but the younger class seem to guess at what it is. It would be a fine thing if you who are involved in it could forgive and forget it all."

The old man shook his head. "I'm afraid that is impossible. King Morrison and me have been enemies for more'n thirty years, and the valleys have lined up with the two of us. I reckon it will end as it is."

"Mr. Morrison feels differently about it, I think; at least I heard him say that he would like to see peace restored. It is a poor way for men to grow old."

Hickland looked long into the fire before replying, then he turned toward Norton curiously.

"Did he say that?"

"Yes."

"Must have been lately."

"Since he joined the church, yes."

"I heard that he was attending the meetings. Did he mention any names?"

"No, but every one knew that he meant the ones involved."

"And that was me, more than any of the rest."

Norton leaned toward the old man with a searching glance. "Is it impossible for you men to get together and wipe out this thing completely?"

"We have been getting farther apart every year. Why, man, I have done everything in my power to hinder him in getting property, and every steer that went into his herd made me hate him worse. I reckon I have been the worst in this line, but I had reason. It seemed that everything came his way; luck or providence or fate, call it what you will, but everything he wanted he got, and I may as well tell you that it was that thing which made us enemies."

Here the woman appeared and gave her husband a searching glance, but he was not looking her way and pretended not to notice it, though Norton saw that he remained silent till she withdrew. When they were alone once more, Norton turned toward him abruptly.

"What was it which started this feud?"

"I reckon it wouldn't seem to be much to you, though it meant a lot to me. You know the old frame for trouble?"

"Jealousy?"

"A woman."

"I see. Go on."

"It started there; then everything that happened made it worse. See them revolvers?" the old man pointed to where a belt with two holsters hung from a deer's horns. "I've carried them for thirty years

waiting for a chance to put their contents into the body of King Morrison." The old man's eyes flashed, then the look of habitual malice passed away and one of sadness took its place.

"I am sure that you are glad it never came, Mr. Hickland."

The ranchman hesitated. "I never took time to reason it out till I got lost in the snow, then it seemed that in spite of everything, the whole thing did look small. I tried to call up what he had done—and he hasn't been a saint—but it wouldn't come in the old way, and I felt that I had been a fool."

"It is not too late to have it all wiped off the slate," Norton insisted, pushing the point as fast as possible.

"I think it is; we are both old men now."

"But you have not told me how it started," Norton reminded, for he saw the man wanted to talk.

The ranchman got up and went to the door, glancing about to locate his wife. When he satisfied himself that she was in another part of the house, he returned and took his seat, and looked into the fire for some time. Then he stirred uneasily, as though pressed against his will.

"It hain't been exactly just to her," he began, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. "She has done her part, all right, but she married me knowing about the other."

Norton waited.

"Did you ever see Mary Morrison?" Norton started at the question, and it was a moment before he could regain his composure. "Of course you have. I haven't seen her since she was a little girl, but she had her mother's features and complexion." The ranchman's

voice broke slightly, then he collected himself and went on. "I have kept away from that region, for I knew what would happen if I went, but the boys tell me she is wonderfully beautiful, and I know she is if she looks like her mother." Another pause. "I reckon you begin to understand what made the difference between King Morrison and me?"

Norton nodded.

"It didn't start in the hill country, but back where the corn grows. Her name was Mary, too, and there was never a woman like her, unless it may be—her—daughter." Again the ranchman lapsed into silence, and Norton waited tensely.

"There ain't so much to it, after all, only I reckon it's a fact that a man's life is made up of small things which curse him or bless him. This was a curse to me. She knew I loved her, I'm not ashamed of the word, but I saw that John Morrison was her choice. He was one of those chaps who appear to have a natural right to everything he wants, and the gods don't dare refuse him. I was the other way. There was something wrong with everything I took hold of. I suppose I wouldn't have hated him as I came to do if he hadn't been so sure of his good fortune. I saw his farms yield good crops while mine were poor; at the gatherings of the neighborhood he was the favorite, while I was passed by. Of course he wasn't to blame for that, but I held him to account in my heart.

"Then came that night which sent me adrift. It was in the time of harvest, and the hay covered the fields; I remember the smell of it came from everywhere. Mary and I walked down a lane between the

tall corn. She was quiet and seemed to be thinking. My hopes rose, for I had read that women betray their hearts in such ways. I wondered if it could be that she cared—that she felt something for me more than friendship. But when I spoke, it was the old story. John Morrison had entered her life, crowding me out.

"I was young then and strong, and when I saw that her heart was set on him, the hatred I had felt for him flamed up in me multiplied ten times. I said little, but she saw the look in my eyes and protested. She had liked me as a friend, and respected me. I must do nothing that would change her opinion. But the iron had gone deep.

"The next day I found him in the field and assaulted him." Hickland paused as if looking upon the scene of that hour with cleared vision.

"What did he do?" Norton asked.

"I was no match for him, and he held me with his two hands till my temper cooled, and then he asked me if I had spoken to Mary. I did not need to confess it, he saw that I had. Then he admitted that he had not told her that he loved her, and if I could win her hand he would stand aside. I knew that was hopeless, and when I tried to renew the fight, he carried me to the fence and threw me over, and bade me be gone. I cursed him, and I cursed his fields, I cursed his flocks and cattle, I wished him misery and loss to the end of his life.

"There was only one thing I could do, that was get away. But he should not rejoice over me, for I would reduce his boast as much as possible. There was one girl in the neighborhood who loved me. I married

her and came to this country. Then I went into the stock business and got rich, but her face looked at me out of the camp fire and the dust of the drive. It was always with me, and it seemed the hate I felt for that man grew in me like a forest fire. Several years passed, and then he came, to make my bitterness complete.

"It was all a surprise, for he had no idea where I had gone; you understand, I had forbidden Martha to write back, and there was small chance along that line anyway in those days. We met on the trail one day. When he saw me he was willing to be friends, but I cursed him and went on, but the face of the woman seemed more beautiful than ever. Then I remembered my oath, and I made it good. I killed and stole his stock whenever I could; I put poison in his salt licks and took off his finest steers. At last the iron in him showed itself, and he struck back in every way except to steal—he wouldn't do that, and his very honesty maddened me.

"Finally, I began to wish she would die, that he might know what it meant to lose her, and she did, while she was still a young woman. That seemed to cool my hatred a little, but my friends had become involved in the trouble, and while, as you say, they don't just understand it, they were partisan enough.

"So the case has stood for over thirty years, and that's a long time. It would be hard to straighten out an old tree which grew crooked."

"Would you admit that the growth in this case has been warped?" Norton asked quickly.

"I never thought so till yesterday. I never took the time. But when the storm-devils began to call for my

soul, I somehow saw it differently from what I ever did before. Then, when I found that you, his friend, the man who saved his life at the Big Willow, and his girl's life in the cave, had carried me out of the forest on your back, it shook a lot of the anger out of me. But it's hard—hard! Hatred for King Morrison has become a habit with me."

"By your own confession you put yourself in the blame, then?"

"It may seem that I was."

"Then, would it be impossible for you to take a position before the valleys which would set you right, and help to heal this old wound?"

"He would not meet me in it. I know him better than you do."

"Nevertheless, you would put yourself right and be clear."

"I tell you that you don't know him!"

"But if I guarantee that he will, then what will you do?"

"The whole valley would say I had lost my mind after what I have done."

"They would learn better in a little while."

"You don't know what you ask when you propose that."

"It would take courage—more courage than to use those revolvers there. Can you do it?"

The old ranchman rose and paced the floor, his lips twitching nervously. Norton waited for him to speak.

He paused abruptly, and bending over Norton he exclaimed in a high key, "The whole thing was sin—accursed black sin, and it has spoiled the peace of the valleys for years!"

Norton sprang to his feet and grasped Hickland's hand; the moment for which he had waited had come.

"Then help me wipe out that sin and bring back the peace of the Mountain Land!" he cried fervently.

"Does it lie with me altogether?" The old man's eyes burned, and his twitching lips showed the struggle that was going on in his mind.

"You are the key to the situation in this valley. The younger class would be willing to forget it and be friends; and now that the thieves who have infested this region are gone, the way is clear. I will see that King Morrison does his part in every way, for I know what his desires are in the matter."

The ranchman paced the floor for some minutes, then he stopped before Norton and looked at him before speaking. When he did, his words came in a detached manner.

"You saved my life, and I owe you something for that, though God knows it isn't worth a great deal; and if you will get King Morrison to come half way, I'll go the other half—that's all."

Norton gripped the old man's hand. "I'll be back here and speak to this valley on that line in the near future; meantime, you go among the people and declare your intentions for peace and do what you can to pave the way. Will you do that?"

"I will."

"Where shall the gathering be held?"

"I suppose a place will have to be arranged. Leave that to me. This storm is only for two or three days, and then the weather will be pleasant. I will send you word when things are ready."

Taking a trail out of the valley by a lower pass,

THE FORELOCK OF TIME

Norton avoided the snow in the higher hills and reached the Silver Bow as the night was falling again, yet with no sense of weariness, for his heart was singing the song of joy—the song which makes age and weariness impossible. Because of the new turn things had taken, Norton abandoned his purpose of visiting among the ranchmen of the rival valley. There was much to be done at home to secure the ground he had gained.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE VOICE OF A WOMAN

For two or three days after Norton's departure Hickland moped about in sullen thought. The reaction had come, and he found it hard to go on with his part of the agreement.

Clearer than ever the old scores presented themselves to him, and he grew more bitter than usual toward the man who had been the bane of his life. This was aggravated by a scene with his wife in which she brought a charge of unfaithfulness toward her, for she had caught enough of the conversation to understand what was being discussed.

Gradually the old man argued himself into the belief that he had been a fool, and that it was not for him to proceed with the matter. He was on the point of writing to Norton stating his change of mind when he received a letter which touched adroitly on the point of a ranchman's regard for his word. Norton had reckoned on just what was taking place in the mind of the old stockman and his message came just in the right time, for it renewed his determination to at least submit the whole matter to the vote of the valley.

With this compromise in his mind, he went up and down among the ranches stating his position and naming a place and date where the matter would be presented with a chance for each man to have his say.

If the valley wanted to bury the hatchet, he was willing; if they did not, he would continue as he was till death closed the book for good. By going about it in this way he would run no risk of losing face by anything he might do in the matter.

At a place where the forest came close to the valley, and the mountains rose abruptly from the rim of the meadows the booth was made. Hickland had the work done by his own men, and saw to it that there was ample room for all who might wish to be at the gathering. The weather had cleared, and the snow vanished spiritlike from the face of the land. In a week the roads gave a thin dust to hoof and wheel.

Meantime Norton had done some quiet work among the ranchmen on the Silver Bow. King Morrison he found more than willing to have peace, and at every turn he met only encouragement. While he had spoken openly of the fact that there was to be a gathering in the rival valley to consider the matter of putting down the old feuds, he took care not to state when. It would be better to have only those whom he could count on for their good judgment and coolness present. Accordingly, Norton gave the date to not more than half a dozen, among them King Morrison, who instantly planned to be present.

When Norton communicated what had happened to Scotty Baldwin, the eyes of the rider grew misty and he held the hand of his friend in a firm clasp for some time without speaking. "God is with you!" he managed to say at last, but very brokenly.

As is the way with such things, Hickland unconsciously became the champion of his own cause. He had expected to go through the valley merely stating

the case, but when in certain quarters he was received with brawling banter and sometimes contempt, he stood up with spirit for the carrying out of the program. Still, he did not move from the determination to make the valley jointly responsible for what might be done. Personally, he would cease to try to do his enemy harm, but that would be all of it if the rest were opposed to peace.

At last the message came from Hickland saying that all was in readiness, naming the place, and Norton, accompanied by Tank Campbell, Baldwin, the Miner, and Alex Sanders, slipped out of the Silver Bow in mid-afternoon and entered the forest which skirted the sleeping hills. King Morrison had found it impossible to go with them because in a weakened condition of health. Norton remembered that Mary stood in the door watching them ride away, and that the sun on her hair made it very bright.

The cool June stars wantoned over the Mountain Land as they left the cañon, down which they had been going for two hours, and Norton glimpsed the blinking lights of the gathering place with a strange sense of anxiety. There had been a tone of doubt in Hickland's letter which intimated that all would not be free going in the matter, and while he had expected as much, still the dread of failure caused him some anxious thoughts.

The crowd which they found assembled told Norton that the matter was of vital interest to the people of the valley, for there were hundreds present. As they dismounted, a man came and took their horses with a rather friendly greeting, which was repeated by several here and there, for the struggle he had made for the

life of old man Hickland had put Norton into the good graces of at least a portion of the ranchmen.

As Norton and his companions entered the arbor the buzz of voices trailed off to a thin sound which ceased entirely as he took the stand, after shaking hands with Hickland and others.

The members of his party settled in the seats which seemed to have been reserved for guests, and all became expectant, eager, as Norton began to speak. In a clear voice he took them back over the time he had spent in the mountain country, and showed them his heart. It had been his hope that he might see them united; that the riders from all the valleys might sit down at the same camp fire and eat from the same cook-wagon. This had been his dream. Was it impossible? That would be a bright day for all when the goodly sun should shine on the sections united in peace and harmony. It would take courage to accomplish such a result, but once the bitterness had passed there would be the consciousness of having done well, which was no small reward. As he spoke, Norton felt the crowd draw toward him. It was clear that they were deeply interested.

As he took his seat there was a period of silence, then the Miner rose and turned so he could face his hearers. All eyes were fastened upon him, and some stood up in the back so they might have a better chance to hear.

"Seein' that this proposition comes from the Silver Bow, I reckon that it is our part to show why we think it would be better to have a change." The Miner paused to let his words filter into the understanding of the crowd. "Now, I hain't got much to say, only

that I know by experience that this thing we call hate is a losin' proposition, anywhere. Why, hang it, I knowed a couple of partners who got up grouchy one mornin' and had a rumpus over the bread. One said it wasn't done, and the other blamed his mate for the fire bein' low; and the first any of us knowed they was at it fist and claw. Well, sir, that went on till they split their claims and got into the courts, and finally one of them killed the other, and the miners hung the murderer, and later on somebody set fire to their cabin, and a company jumped their claims. One of 'em was married, and I heard afterwards that his widow went insane because she had such a hard time to get along, to say nothin' of the fact that the youngsters were scattered out among strangers and growed up without knowin' each other.

"Now, that case will show you that it don't pay to go around nussin' trouble. About half of our wrongs is only in our own heads anyway, and if we'd give ourselves a chance to get the cobwebs off our wits we'd see what a bunch of noddlepates we'd been. Look at the trouble between the valleys: I reckon that there hain't a dozen here as can give a clear idea of what it is and where it started, and yet we've gone around carryin' guns for each other. I say we ought to let it all slide, and get together like mountain folks should. This old range which divides the valleys sends down a thousand streams to both, and the sun warms 'em at the same time. It would be mighty fine if we could forgit our nonsense and act like sensible folks, and right here let me say that I drive my stakes on this proposition: Let us have peace." The Miner sat down with the consciousness that he had not spoken in vain,

while the crowd relaxed, waiting for the next thing to happen.

In clear tones, and with a fluency of speech which astonished all who heard him, Baldwin made his plea for harmony. He was frank to admit that he had been too willing to have part in any disorder which came along, and that there was no doubt but blame attached to both sections; old Jed Anderson had admitted as much just before he died. But now he believed a better day was at hand, thanks to his friend Norton, and he was hoping that they might all come to feel that same way.

Alex Sanders had little to say. He did not need to tell them that he was no talker, but he was spurs and quirt for peace, and they could count him in on any vote which would carry that issue.

Norton noticed many new faces in the crowd. There were those present who had not been touched with the better spirit which was coming to the Mountain Land, and these showed very clearly their disapproval of the proceedings. They had ridden down from the ranches on the upper streams to have a voice in the discussion. To them, the Silver Bow had been a lawful prey. Naturally enough, they preferred that the old order should continue, and that Hickland be shown his delusion. All this Norton sensed as he studied the faces before him for signs of opposition.

Tank Campbell's speech was characteristic in every sense. There was some effort at remarkable words with a sprinkling of wit and homely wisdom. He spoke of the case of Guber, and what the coming of the Guide had meant to him. He hoped they would take it from him that it would be better to quit the

fuss and all have a part in the great drive toward the last divide.

While Norton was permitting these brief speeches, his keen understanding of men told him that the real struggle had not come. Deep in that mass of lawless humanity he knew there was a stratum of inflammable nature which waited only a spark to set it roaring against all that was good. It was that spark which he feared. If this could be avoided till the sentiment had been made, which was necessary to carry the valleys to a better condition, all would be well, but if not—well, his hope would end in chaos, that was all.

As Campbell took his seat some newcomers entered, wedging in among those already crowding the seats. Norton caught a smell of liquor and was troubled. A man rose on the right and began to state some personal grievance. He had been the loser at the hands of the Silver Bow ranchmen. His stock had been stolen, and he was in no frame of mind to forget it. He took his seat sullen and scowling. A second man rose at the back and pointing at Baldwin, accused him of stealing one of his steers. Norton glanced at the rider and saw his face pale. The look he flashed at his friend contained a question and a denial. Norton showed his confidence with an expression. When the man took his seat, Baldwin rose and offered to pay for anything in his possession which anyone might feel had not been properly accounted for; that he would restore two steers equally as good as the one the man might name.

At this point another danger loomed up. It would be fatal to create a contrast between the two valleys

in favor of the Silver Bow, for the crowd would resent it. Tank Campbell rose and turned the tide with a few remarks which showed that he spoke perhaps better than he knew.

"I don't know that loafer what just took his seat after that rot about Baldwin stealin' a steer, and I might as well tell ye that I has no hankerin' to. One thing is sure, he ain't of the regular valley stamp; he must be a stray from some rye grass flat where he has to catch rain and jackrabbits to live. All you people down here in civilization knows that the man who says Baldwin ever stole one of his steers is a liar, and that's a word with the bark on, and we don't want to consider his speech in this here proceedin'. I knows the most of you folks, and I banks on you to do about the square thing, and I take it that the Silver Bow don't have any bulge on you in this proposition."

Norton saw that this speech had made sentiment for the cause of peace, and if the spark could be kept out of the powder, he hoped to see it accomplished. One thing was against him, and Norton was troubled for a remedy: the feelings of the crowd were not deep enough on the question. If a vote should be taken and the decision be for dropping the trouble, he doubted if the compact would hold because of the lack of conviction as to the right of it.

While Campbell's remarks had taken away the contrast in favor of the Silver Bow, it had not destroyed the desire on the part of many to voice their imagined wrongs. Norton thought of the Italian proverb which says that men hate those they wrong, even if they are not wronged in return. Here and there men got up and spoke against the project. There had been many

things in the past which they had no disposition to forget, and it was best to let matters continue as they were. Some few were half inclined to wish that things were on a friendlier basis, but they feared that there was little hope for a change. Up to this time Hickland had not expressed himself, and Norton saw that he was cowed before the opposition. Slowly the tide began to turn, and the lawless element in the crowd to dominate the rest. At the back a man bawled a challenge at the peace delegation and a swaying of the crowd followed which reminded Norton of wind-stirred corn. The change which came over the men was like the fright of a lone steer at the outskirts of the herd which sets in motion unreasoning thousands. In a trice Norton saw all hopes of harmony swept away, and his heart grew heavy, though he sat calm and unmoved.

A tall ruffian surged to the front, followed by half a dozen others, their hips slouching with revolvers, and their bearded faces showing evil enough in the glare of the lights. The man leaped upon a bench and pointing a finger at Norton thundered a question:

"If all you have said is true, why is it that old King Morrison hain't here to have a word for hisself? I tell you the whole thing's a lie, and the joke's on this here valley. That don't go with us fellers; we know that old thief, and them that stands by him are liars and thieves too. D'ye get me, stranger?"

Norton sprang to his feet, his eyes blazing. Baldwin was at his side instantly. The Miner and Sanders rose and stood ready. An instant of silence followed. All faces were straining forward, and a tenseness held the crowd motionless. Stretching his arm to its full

length, Norton pointed full at the ruffian and the words of a command rumbled in his throat, but the unexpected thing which happened prevented him from uttering them. Mary Morrison stood beside him, her face very pale and her hand lifted for silence. The man on the bench, the crowd, Norton—all, looked at her as if she had been a spirit. Into the tenseness she threw her personality with a gentle, persuasive confidence which melted opposition as snow in a spring Chinook.

"You mountain men, listen to me. I have things to say which you must hear, and you must not refuse. I do not know you, but I know the breed; you are not cowards. Your courage is born of the cliffs and the streams, you have learned it from the storms and the high hills. The eagles have taught you to love the open and the blue sky. Listen to me, even though I live in the Valley of the Silver Bow, and even if I am King Morrison's daughter!" She paused and looked the man on the seat full in the face, and he cowered before her glance like one taken in a crime; a stoop came to his shoulders and he fumbled his hat nervously. Norton glanced at Hickland and saw his glance fastened on the face of the girl as though he might be looking at one who had returned to him from the dead. After a moment, Mary continued:

"This man asks why my father is not here to sanction the taking away of the old feud between the valleys. Let me tell you that sickness is the cause of his absence. There is nothing he desires so much as to be at peace with you all. When he found he would not be able to ride so far, he asked me to come and speak for him, and this is his heart as I was told

to open it to you. There have been wrong things done by both sections, and we need not stop to weigh those matters. Let it stand that both have done what they should not. But my father wants peace with all his heart. When he is able, he will meet you in person and tell you just how he feels.

"I need not tell you that my father is a changed man, and that many of us have come to look at life and its obligations as we never did before. Personally, I desire this better condition, oh, so much!" There was a little break in her voice, and her hands went out to them in appeal. It was the call of weakness to strength, and there is no greater argument with men. Norton saw that the crowd was catching the spirit of the girl, and that a change was coming over them; hope returned, and he waited breathlessly.

"In this land I was born. I have known no other home. Here I played as a child, and here I wish to live, that my grave may be made beside my mother's" —her eyes were swimming now. "I remember her as an angel, patient and good. Once she took me on her knee and told me that I must always do the right and crown my life with that which is unselfish and for the good of others. That was when I was very small. Many times the seasons have changed on the mound above her. There the winter snows have drifted and the summer has dreamed; there the autumn leaves heap themselves when the trees give up their glory. It is all so sad, so lonely sometimes. I have tried to find her in the moonlight and by the rush of white waters; I have stood in the shadow of great woods when it seemed she came and took my hand and kissed me with those dear lips of hers.

Often, oh, so often! I have wanted her—have wanted her! but I have had to go on alone, except that my father was with me. Once more the flowers are on her grave—the first blossoms of the spring, and nature is in another of her resurrections, and this is the message which they speak to us, with their roots in her heart: 'Forgive!' and again, 'forgive!'" The girl's voice broke completely for a moment, then, rallying with an effort, she went on, her face patrician with lofty purpose.

"Men of the Mountain Land; men with the tang of the wind in your blood, hear the message of the flowers that grow on my mother's grave; hear the call of her dust, for they plead with you to be exalted, to be your noblest selves!" She raised her eyes to where the clean stars hung listening in the vast sky spaces, and without a break in the stream of pleading, changed her words to prayer—prayer which the silent crowd could understand: "O my sainted mother!" she cried, "if it is given those immortal and glorified spirits who have passed the boundaries of time and earth to return to their once human habitations and touch with spirit fingers the consciousness of those who still dwell in houses of clay, come, O my mother!—my mother, whose name I bear, come and melt these hearts with thy sweet pleading for the peace which you longed to see! O God of the hills and the valleys! God of the streams and the vast woods! Change these hearts to hearts of flesh, and bring to us the love and oneness which ought to bind us as the sun binds the ranges with ropes of flowers and grass!"

As Mary ceased and stood with tear-stained eyes, her lips parted and her cheeks flushed, Hickland rose

and with sincere emotion begged that his friends would enter into the spirit of better things.

"Do it men, do it!" he pleaded. "It's all wrong, always has been wrong. I have been wrong—ten times worse than King Morrison. You don't understand. It started back there, a long time ago. Yes, yes, her name was Mary. You are like her, girl, the same eyes, the same form. I see you don't understand. Well, it was best. I know where he buried her, I found the place, when the stars were like they are to-night. But let that go. By her ashes we shall have peace: by the voice of her child, we shall have peace! I will plead for it; I will go and ask it of my enemy. Who will stand by me?"

The instant the old ranchman ceased speaking the eyes of the crowd flashed back as one man's to Mary, who stood still, pulsant with the exalted feelings which had carried her out of herself. The meeting of their eyes was a shock. There was an involuntary movement toward the girl. Men rose to their feet unconsciously. The moment had come, Norton knew that, and with a swift, deciding motion he rose to his full height and sent four words among them vibrant with leadership:

"Who stands for peace?"

"Peace! Peace!" came from everywhere.

In an instant the crowd was up, and men were waving their hats and shouting it, till the thunder of their choice rolled away to the hills, a flood of sound which set the watch-dogs barking at all the nearest ranches.

The victory had come in the very moment of defeat, and that by the words of a woman. To Norton there was no cause for wonder. How could any man or

crowd of men resist the voice of Mary Morrison? He flashed her a look of gratitude which she received with calm dignity, though her eyes wavered a little, but that was because Scotty Baldwin had taken her hand and was saying impulsive things. Norton sprang among the crowd, giving his hand right and left to men who grasped it with words of friendship, but nowhere did he encounter the ruffian who had stood on the seat, for he and his followers had slunk away.

With a winsome grace, Mary gave her hand to those who swarmed about her, speaking low words of appreciation and encouragement, and thus sealing permanently the sentiment which her plea had produced.

Pushing his way to the platform, Norton called the people to order and began to speak of the further developments of the plan for harmony:

"Seeing that this propositon to bury the trouble between the two valleys came first from the Silver Bow, we feel that you are our guests in the working out of the plans. We invite you to our valley to partake of our hospitality, and we assure you that there will be nothing left undone that would in any way make you welcome. Tell me by the uplifted hand that you will come!" All hands were raised. "That is settled, then," Norton went on with satisfaction. "We will need a little time to make arrangements, but not long. When we send for you, come, young and old, men and women."

"And children!" broke in an old ranchman with a patriarchal face.

"Yes, bring the children, by all means; we want them too."

The good nature of the crowd expressed itself in a

general laugh at this, and not wishing to dissipate it, Norton waved them all farewell and passed out of the inclosure. At the door he met Baldwin, who took him aside, stating that he thought it best to ride back with Mary. To this Norton agreed instantly, hiding the pain in his heart.

Alex Sanders and Campbell decided to spend the night in the valley, leaving Norton and the Miner to cross the range alone. As he rode on through the June night Norton reviewed the happenings of the evening. It had all been so unexpected, so exactly to his taste. What could have pleased him more than to have Mary Morrison accomplish what he was unable to do in the matter of peace? Nothing, only that one thing which could never be. He knew that now as never before, for he had seen the wavering of her eyes and the flush of her cheek as Baldwin took her hand. Ah, well, that was his portion, and he would bear it like a man, though he knew now that the loss of her would be to him as an eating cancer of longing and regret.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE CLASPING OF HANDS

JUNE was ripe on the mountains. The bunch grass waved green in the summer wind, and the laurel spiced the glades. From the face of the rejoicing land the singing of birds went up like the giving of thanks.

There was great excitement in the valleys. All arrangements had been made for the gathering of the people, and the day had arrived. Norton had seen to it that an ideal spot was selected. It was not enough that there would be good feeling among them; he proposed to have the surroundings correspond with the spirit of the gathering.

Accordingly, a small valley was selected where the hills made a circle on three sides. The grass grew a carpet over the ground, and the aspen thickets made dainty little worlds of crisp beauty, where streams came flashing clear and cold out of the depths of the folded woods.

In one of the most enticing of these Norton had the platform made from which he was to speak to the people. There was a back wall of evergreens and a roof, but the sides and front were open. Close before he put the seats among the pines which covered a large place with shadow. Back of the seats were the long tables which were to groan with the best things the valley afforded, while space was left at the rim of the grove for the tying of teams and saddle horses.

The night before the gathering, he sat on the veranda and talked to the woman who had been to him as a mother, and who had understood his mission from the first as many had not. To her he unfolded the hope which had been born within him that first night they talked. To the accomplishment of the peace of the rival valleys he had bent every energy, and now that he was to see his efforts crowned with success he desired that she might rejoice with him. Below them the meadows, dotted with sleeping cattle, reached away to the river; and beyond, the Burial Cliffs, with their memories of another night with its strange experiences, stood up gray and misty. It was an hour of rest from uncertainty, and Norton drank the sweetness of it to the full.

The wonder of the June morning drenched the mountains as Norton rode away alone toward the gathering place. The Widow Rogers would come later with Jenny Mallow, who had run in early that she might ride over with her.

Along all the roads went vehicles and people on horseback. There would be ranchmen at the gathering from about Senora, as well as curious visitors from Little Smoky and the Lone Juniper regions. This was to be a forum day for the Mountain Land, and Norton rejoiced in it. As he neared the place of meeting he saw the people of the other valley coming in by different trails. There was no haste manifest anywhere; all were riding quietly as if possessed of a feeling that dignity should characterize all that was done.

When he arrived Norton found Scotty Baldwin and Alex Sanders moving about, while Tank Campbell and

Painter appointed themselves to look after the teams and saddle horses. Others were coming up every moment, and Norton was pleased to see that general good humor prevailed. Each one seemed impressed with a sense of responsiblity to make the gathering a success, and to bring to their fulfillment the hopes of the unselfish man who had so strangely woven his life with theirs.

By a little forethought it was arranged that the two valleys should have opposite sides of the camp with an aisle between. There would come a moment of climax, Norton had planned that, and he wished to have things in harmony with the purpose of the gathering.

As the crowd grew, he went to the platform and sat watching the throng below. It was a strange sight, this coming together of the people who had been enemies. Then he remembered that it had come about mainly by the words of a woman who had gone to his aid when the last hope for the realization of his dream seemed tottering into chaos. Instinctively, Norton ranged his glance over the crowd to find her, but she was not there. To the left he saw Hickland, his legs crossed and his elbow resting on his knee, while his fingers pulled nervously at the thin beard which covered his chin.

Norton's thoughts were busy. After all, he knew that had it not been for Mary Morrison, failure would have rewarded his efforts. How he blessed her in his heart that she had come to him in that bitter hour, turning his night into wonderful day, and changing forever the old order of hate into one of love and peace.

Woman! What fields opened to his mind—fields of folly and wreckage, fields of service and dazzling glory. There at the first of the somber line of sirens stood Jezebel, and the sisters of Jezebel, and back of her, others like unto Eve. On this side, passion-swept breasts had whirled men to doom. Before these, kings had gone down, and dust had covered their thrones. For the smile of a courtesan, princes had gone to sit with lepers beyond the gate. How the line lengthened: serpent-mangled Cleopatra and worse-than-slain Antony! Was it not a woman who kept the chancellors of Europe busy, and came near causing an open rupture between Sicily and the court at Saint James? What lay back of the French Reign of Terror? A woman's wasteful hands and a woman's wondrous face. Then, too, there was that other Mary, Scotland's bonny queen, whose step was like the light breaking on the lakes of her own land. Dungeons and chains had gone with her smile, and deep scars on the hearts of men.

Yet there was another line over which hovered no such cloud. The mothers of men were there, travailers in sorrow and the weepers of tears. On their hands lay branches of palm, and in their glorious eyes beamed the evidence of the Divine. Out of their hearts had gone altar fires to the ends of the world; out of their mouths praise which silenced the angels. Winding white and dim he saw it come, the cable which bound earth to heaven, the soul which had brought forth a God. As if he beheld that which was corporal, Norton leaned forward and gazed at the whiteness of the one who headed this strange line, and as he looked, the fanciful seemed to drop away and the spirit essence

took tangible shape—the wondrous form of Mary Morrison. At that instant his vision cleared, and he saw her coming down the aisle between the tall pines, her hand in that of her father.

"When you get back from Mars, I'll tell you that I believe they are all here," said Baldwin, speaking to Norton in a low tone. The sight of the rider reminded him of the gulf which lay between the girl and himself, for he had seen what convinced him that she was not indifferent to the man in whom any woman could see plenty to admire.

"I was dreaming," Norton replied, smiling. "I will give out a song."

Norton had drilled those who were in the habit of attending the services at the Junction on a song which would swell the soul of the gathering and send it in the right direction. In a clear, even voice, the tones of which penetrated to the farthest listener, Norton read:

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love"—

As he expected, the singing was mostly done by the Silver Bow side, the others listening in mute wonder to the words which conveyed so clearly the meaning of the gathering. Toward the end, after Norton had urged all to have a part in it, a reaction set in, and many new voices took up the tune. Then he announced that they would sing it through again, and this time the united voices of both valleys swelled away to the listening hills, the echoes crashing among the cliffs.

Norton's eyes grew misty as he listened. Surely the dew was on Hermon, and the smell of the mown grass was sweet. Here and there he saw heads droop

and handkerchiefs go to eyes unused to tears. He glanced at Mary and saw that happy drops brimmed to overflowing on her lids. The King drew his sleeve across his eyes and winked very fast. All were melted under the spell which lay upon them.

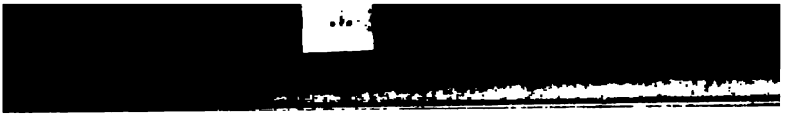
Norton spoke briefly. The things which had led up to the gathering were touched upon delicately, especially his own part in bringing it to pass. The gratitude he felt he expressed fully, and then went on to set the meeting in order for what he knew must follow.

He glanced at Hickland as he took his seat. The old man was deeply moved.

The crucial moment had arrived. Mary bowed her head on her father's arm. All eyes were turned in the direction of the King, who rose slowly and made his way to the platform in evident weakness. When he faced the breathless crowd there was a moment in which he struggled for self-control, then he spoke in slow, well-measured terms, while his eyes remained dim with the mist which indicated to what depth his nature had been stirred.

"If any man had told me two years ago that such a scene as this were possible, I should have considered him foolish. If I had been asked at that time to do what I am now, I should have grown angry at the suggestion. But there has been a change in many of us, and a better order of things has come to the Mountain Land. I am glad for this day, and I hope the peace which is to be accomplished here will last as long as grass grows and streams run.

"I think I will not be misunderstood in saying that there have been wrong things done on both sides, though I am glad to say that I have taken no man's



property without right. But in other ways I have been as hot-headed as the rest of you. It all started far away from here; you younger people don't understand how, and it isn't necessary that you should be told, but James Hickland knows, and I know. But we are equal now, for there is a grave over there on the slope which was made in my heart as well as the ground, and I shall soon be beside her—my own lost Mary! Lost to both of us, Jim, lost to both of us!"

The old man's voice broke at this point and he drew his hand over his eyes. Then collecting himself, he stretched his hands and cried, while the sobbing of women came up from the crowd. "If I have wronged any man I ask that man's forgiveness. The end of the trail is in sight for me; the Great Divide is not far away. I am an old man now, and I don't want to take anything into the sunset that would look bad against the clean white. This day I cast the fire from my breast, and with all my soul I am for peace." The old ranchman leaned toward his once bitter enemy and extended his hand. "James Hickland!" he said, "I hated you once, but I love you now—love you as a brother. Here is my hand—take it, and let us be friends."

Hickland sprang from his seat and strode to the front. Bowed with years, the old men clasped hands, their beards twitching with emotion and their breasts heaving.

"It was her grave which brought me vision, Hickland, and I understand it all better now. Let it go, for she is lost to us both."

"I was the most to blame, John. I hated you for doing what I should have been glad to do. I couldn't

give up—till I saw *her* child that night, with the same face and eyes, and it seemed I was back there walking beside her with the corn rustling on either side, and that she was asking me to forgive you for a wrong you had never done. All the bitterness left me in a minute, for I loved her, John! God! I tell you, I loved her!"

The rest was drowned in the burst of exclamations and sobs which went up from the crowd which could control their feelings no longer. Again and again the deep voice of Tank Campbell rallied the people to a fresh outburst, till the wild goats stood up on the far-off cliffs and looked wonderingly toward the valley.

Norton bowed his head in his hands. While he sat thus, Scotty Baldwin came to his side.

"This is a mighty good day for the valleys, old friend, and it shows that your work has not been in vain," he whispered, gripping Norton's hand like a vise.

Norton was too moved to speak, but he returned the pressure and Baldwin understood.

When order had been restored, Norton rose and in a few words voted the different sections, putting the matter in the form of a covenant, and not a man kept his seat, and not a woman. King Morrison and Hickland were close together at the front, looking the mellowness they felt. At a word from Norton they faced the crowd and all understood what was coming. Scarcely waiting for an invitation, they came thronging from all sides to grip the hands of the old ranchmen. Then the streams of good-feeling flowed bank full, and there was general striking of palms and crying of happy women.

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Arm in arm with the two old ranchmen

THE CLASPING OF HANDS

At this juncture the spirits of the people were lifted into thunderclaps of applause by the solemn appearance of Alex Sanders and Blake with spades on their shoulders, followed by Tank Campbell and Charlie Painter carrying a hatchet with a very long handle.

Proceeding very seriously, the first two opened a narrow slit in the ground, into which the others dropped the hatchet. Again the people gave way to roars of laughter and applause, which was intensified by the solemn behavior of the four men who were conducting the ceremony.

When the trench had been filled, Billy Bowers appeared with a post squared on two sides. This was set with the flattened portions true to the positions of the valleys. On the smooth surfaces had been cut the words, "Our Covenant." Then the five men retired, leaving the spectators to enjoy the make-believe with its lesson as well as amusement.

"What fools we have been!" King Morrison said to Norton as he stepped down from the platform.

"That's a world habit," Norton replied, laughing.

"I believe it; but thank God it isn't too late to get some sense!"

Arm in arm with the two old ranchmen, who insisted that he should walk between them, Norton made his way toward the long tables on which the women were spreading the contents of baskets and boxes. The feast followed, and such a feast as it was!—fattened fowl and juicy loins of stall-fed calves, with wild fruits and jellies from last year's picking, to say nothing of the endless rows of cakes, pies, salads, and puddings, and all the other wonders of woman's kitchen art.

There was enough for all, and the wind-browned men of the trail laid by in store to their utmost capacity. Chesty laughter and rugged banter, unhewn and apt, passed the time pleasantly, and all who took part in the doings of that day felt that somehow God had been good, and that his glory lay very softly on the valleys.

There were still many lingering about when Norton led out his horse and prepared to ride away. The King and Mary left early, because of the indisposition of the ranchman, and Baldwin had accompanied them. Norton watched them ride off through the lengthening shadows of the long afternoon with a heavy ache at his heart.

"They are a picture," he mused resignedly. "I do not see how she could fail to be attracted to him, and no man with a soul could help but worship her." With an effort he tore his glance from the loved form and began to arrange his saddle, though he did not leave for an hour.

Every heart has a burial ground where lie old loves and losses, and Norton walked mentally among the tombs in his soul as he went home through the last hours of the day. Back there in the days of decision he had turned aside from the flattering chances of preferment offered by admiring friends, and putting his mother's clinging arms from his neck had come to this land to lose his life. He did not regret this, and less now than ever before, yet it required the supremest effort of his will to resign forever the woman who had come to be to him as the soul of his soul. Long ago he had ceased to deny it: he loved her devotedly, utterly, with all the power of his nature.

Yet, as he rode homeward through the shadows of the June evening, he entered into a struggle with the angel, and conquered, though the limp of the Prince was in his spirit. She could never be his, he was sure of that. In fact, he could not ask it, when, if he could possess her, it would break the heart of his dearest friend. Yet, he would enshrine her image in his centermost soul and, bearing the pain of his unanswered yearnings, give his life more wholly to others.

CHAPTER XXXV

HEART HUNGER

SCOTTY BALDWIN turned into the road that led to the Widow Rogers's place and went on slowly. For once he was not in a hurry. A crisis had come in the life of the rider, and his thoughts were troubled.

Let his fate be what it might, he must have the matter settled for good; and though she might never be his, it would be a relief to hear it from the girl herself. One thing was certain, he had carried the matter in his own breast as long as he would. Till now, he had felt that he was unworthy of her, but that was different. Yes, he would go to her and tell her all he felt—had felt for years—and she would at least respect him for considering her the queenliest woman in the world.

He had loved the girl ever since they first met, when she was shy as a fawn and like the sago lily. Yet he dared not risk the hope of his life on a single throw, for she had never given him reason to feel that she thought of him as other than a friend. She had been kind, very kind, but he had seen her laugh as lightly with others as she had ever done with him. They had ridden together along the streams, under the whispering cottonwoods, but that was all. The thing he desired most had not been given, and if the girl had felt more than friendship for him, she had done well in keeping it from his eyes.

Then the coming of the Guide had lessened even the wavering hope which remained, for what was more natural than that he should see in her the mate for him? She was good and would not shrink from the sacrifice. Then, too, he remembered that Norton had seemed to desire to be with her the day of the chase, and on other occasions as well.

And so the difficulties which go with imperfect understanding were multiplied, for the abiding reserve which had characterized the girl's attitude toward the rider was caused by a fear that another could not be less than ideal in his estimation. She too had seen that which confirmed her suspicions along this line, and true to the nature of such a woman she went on seeking to hide the pain of the sacrifice.

Riding slowly, Baldwin fought his battle and conquered. If all he feared should prove to be true, yet he would not be less a man. There are some hearts capable of vast surrenders, and such was Baldwin's. Only the weak go down under their losses.

As he rode up he saw Norton sitting on the porch and motioned him to come down. Together they walked into the forest where the shadows were very deep and cool. There Baldwin turned toward his friend with a little embarrassment in his manner.

"Guide," he began, "I have come to open my heart to you, and you must listen till I get through. I saw her on the meadow not an hour ago. She was all in white, with wild roses at her throat, and as beautiful as an angel. I had gone to tell her my feelings, and —and then I remembered that perhaps you loved her, and so I came here first. But I want to hear you say so, if you do; and I want it like a man, with no thought

as to my feelings in the matter. I have had my fight and I will not yield an inch, however it goes. But, Guide, I have loved her ever since she was a slender thing, shy as a deer, when we used to ride over the mesas in the old days. Twice I have saved her life, and all that; but there was always something about her which made me afraid to tell her how I felt. So the years have passed; but now it seems my heart is too large for my body, and I must know! But when I remembered that you might have come to care for her, I thought I would ask you about it first."

Norton felt the moment of his supreme trial had come. Taking the hand of the rider in his, he pressed it warmly, while his shoulders seemed to square themselves for a great load.

"My noble friend," he said, "of whom do you speak."

"You must have guessed it before this, Guide?"

"Perhaps—yes, I am sure I have."

"I tried to keep it out of sight, but suppose that's a hard thing to do."

"I am quite sure this has been the cause of your suspense."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply this: No man could help but see things in you to admire, Baldwin, and I haven't a doubt but she has. One thing is sure, the King would be—"

"The King!" Baldwin's face underwent a change on the instant. "It isn't Mary at all; it's Jenny—Jenny Mallow!"

It was Norton's turn to show surprise.

"I—I thought you were referring to Mary Morrison," he stammered, the look of relief giving way to

one of uncertainty. If Baldwin did not love her, perhaps she cared for him, which made his own case equally as hopeless. Life was full of such contradictions.

"Mary is worthy of the love of any man, but we were never more than friends. Somehow, the other girl seemed to fit into my stormy nature just about right. But—but I thought—that is, I wondered if perhaps—"

"You thought that I had come to like Jenny Mallow, and you wanted to find out before seeking your own happiness; that's what you meant to say, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I'm frank to tell you it was, but I couldn't just get at it."

"But I do not love her; she is only my friend. I have never had more than respect in my heart for her."

"I was mistaken then," Baldwin commented to himself, drawing a deep breath.

"Yes, you were mistaken."

"I am glad I was, Guide. Is that selfish?"

"No."

"Can you guess how much I think of her?"

"All you are able, and that's a good deal."

"Right you are again."

"Go and claim the hand of this fair lady; remember, a faint heart never did so; I have every reason to believe she is waiting for you, and that she has been for years."

"Do you think there is a chance that she may like me, Guide?" The question, and expression which accompanied it, flashed to Norton a secret fear which he saw was troubling the rider.

"I have not a doubt of it. Really, I have seen that

which makes me sure of it. Your fear on the other line is groundless. Go straight to her, and tell her as you have told me, and Jove be with you."

"I'll put it to the test, and when you see me again I will be the happiest man on earth, or the saddest. Good-by, Guide. Here's hoping that you will wish me well." Baldwin leaned down and took the hand of his friend in a long clasp. Then he was gone at the old breakneck pace.

Norton stood looking after him till he disappeared among the cottonwoods at the ford, then he turned back toward the house.

"Noble, unspoiled man," he mused. "Such confessions would not stand out in the big world of guile and make-believe; they would be the opportunity for deception and heartache, but not so here. The frankness of the sunshine has crept into your soul, and you have not been ashamed to speak the truth."

For once, Baldwin did not remember to look for the big trout by the rock at the ford. He was about to stake his life and happiness on a toss at love. He did not pretend to have the key which would admit him into that Pandora box of contradictions, a woman's soul. He knew that poets had tried to read the inner scripture of her breast and had found denials where they had hoped to embrace promises. What was he, that he could hope even to guess at the answer she would give? Then he was not so sure that Jenny Mallow had escaped the resistless personality of his friend. He did not see how any woman could keep from being swept into an utter worship of him; and if he found such to be the case he could not blame her.

Opening the big gate where the road from the

Mallow Ranch joined the one which came down from the hills, Baldwin rode through and closed it without dismounting. It was at this place he had turned back to go to Norton. He rode slowly now. The place and hour were fit for the amours of a god. From the meadows came the breath of June flowers, and the air held a suggestion of mystery.

He found her seated on a bank, where a cluster of aspens cast a dappled shade, in her lap the sprays of wild hyacinth which she had gathered.

He threw himself down beside her and tried to frame his words in his mind. She had greeted him with a smile, and began at once to talk in a cheerful vein.

"You are happy, Jenny?" he introduced, hesitatingly.

"Yes. Why should I not be? I have everything to make me so."

"I can't say it," he replied.

"Aren't you happy, Scotty?" she asked, her voice very low and mellow.

"Yes and no—that is, I am, but I could be more so if—if—" Baldwin found at this point that he had run out of words.

Her eyes were full of questioning now, and a tinge of carnation came to her cheeks.

"I'll try that again," he said, stoutly. "I meant to say that I am happy, but—but—well, confound it, Jenny! You know what I mean, you must know. You could make me a thousand times happier if you would just say that—that you like me even a little bit. There now, it's out, and I mean it!" He had preempted her hands, holding them in spite of her little struggles to

be free, and what he read in her eyes was so clearly written that even Baldwin understood.

After he had held her a long time very close to him he blurted out:

"The Guide was right!"

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"I thought perhaps you might care for some one else, but he said I was mistaken, and I chanced it."

"You talked to him before coming here?"

"Yes."

"What about. A woman's curiosity, you see."

"I thought he might have seen in you something to like as well as I."

"And you intended to get out of the way if he did?"

"Yes."

"You dear, unselfish boy, how blind you have been! I have loved you all my life."

The confession brought a flood of scarlet to her cheeks which Baldwin thought the prettiest thing he had ever seen.

The soft June hours went by on tip-toe, each one leaving a benison on their happy spirits. And they talked as only lovers can, of the thousand little things which answered for the materials of conversation. Both had planned to be unselfish. Baldwin had intended to make way for Norton; Mary should have the first chance with Jenny. Thus the time passed, and when she was compelled to go, he walked with her over the meadows as lovers have always walked since the first confession of the first burning heart.

The impatient rider would not consent to wait for the fulfillment of his dreams. He had done all he cared to of that; so it followed that on a quiet evening

not long after, the Guide united them, also Alex Sanders and the Teacher.

The ceremony was very simple, very brief, the bride beautiful and happy as she stood beside the man she loved. After the guests were gone, they came to Norton for a handclasp each, and some words which were out of the depths of their hearts.

Then he watched them as they faded into the dusk with a hunger in his own heart which could never be satisfied. Afterward, he recalled the sadness in the face of Mary Morrison while she stood beside her friend. Was he mistaken? He believed he was not; and he was sure he knew the reason. If he was right, then for her there remained only long hopeless years in which she would endure in silence the disappointment which was her portion, for to the heart of Mary Morrison could come only one love, one overmastering passion which, if denied its fulfillment, would consume like an altar flame the sacrifice which was laid there.

Norton's thoughts were not those of a weak man who meets his disappointments with unworthy complaint. His was the strong nature which smiles on when its best hopes and dreams go crashing into chaos. So it was with a spirit chastened and subdued in the presence of what seemed the denial of his life's best wish that he went down the magical valley, after he had watched Baldwin and Jenny enter their new, sweet existence according to the plan of God.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A SHOCK OF CORN

KING MORRISON had understood better than his friends guessed, for the weakness which had made it hard for him to reach the peace gathering increased. It was a general breaking-down rather than disease. He had been right when he said that the Great Divide was in sight.

Norton returned from a visit to a distant camp to find the old ranchman confined to his bed and sinking fast. His couch had been moved close to one of the front windows through which he could see the meadows asleep in the July sun, and the tall cottonwoods beyond, permitting here and there glimpses of the river.

The old man smiled as Norton approached. There was no mistaking the call—it was the end of the trail. It was well. The peace for which he had spoken had come to his own breast, and he could slip through the shadowy pass from one world to the other without fear.

"I hope you are mistaken, Mr. Morrison," Norton encouraged. "There should be many years left to you yet."

"Not so, Guide," he answered. "I am an old man, and I have known for some time that it could not be far to the hilltop, but I have both feet in the trail and shall not miss it."

A SHOCK OF CORN

Once when they were alone, the old ranchman placed some papers in Norton's hands which were not to be opened till after his death. They would contain full instructions as to his property. This he desired Norton to look after, saying that he knew of no other man whom he could trust so well. As for Mary, she would go East and find a home with relatives. His youngest sister would be a mother to her.

To all of his old friends Morrison expressed himself as content. He had lived long and had reached the end. He would not shirk from paying the debt he owed to nature.

Toward the end his mind wandered among the scenes of his earlier life. Sometimes he spoke the name of the woman who had been the innocent cause of the long feud between the valleys, and always in terms of endearment. At the hour of twilight his spirit passed—King Morrison was dead.

Mary stood by the bed weeping, her hand still in that of her father, for he had died holding it. Very gently the Widow Rogers drew the stricken girl away, and comforted her as only she could.

The old ranchman had requested that the funeral be very simple, and Norton carried out his wishes fully. Beside the woman he had lost they laid him to rest. About him were other mounds where those he had known in other days were lying. The same summer wind would play over them; the same cloud cover them with snow. There, till the sea gave up its dead, would they lie together, rustled over by the fading grass, and drifted by autumn leaves.

The Widow Rogers insisted that Mary should go home with her, and the girl yielded after much per-

suasion, for she shrank from the closer contact with the man who dominated her inner being with a resistless power.

"You must stay with me, Mary, till you leave the valley, and if I could keep you here you would not go at all," the older woman said, as they entered the house. "I don't see how we are going to get along without you, child."

"It was my father's wish, you know, and it may be best."

"I will take you in as my very own daughter if you will stay."

Mary shook her head, though she would have been glad to do just that.

"I think I should follow out father's plan for me," she answered, and Mrs. Rogers did not urge the matter further.

When Mary became more resigned Norton brought the papers to her and they opened them together. To his surprise, he found his own name mentioned for a yearly sum which was to be spent in taking to all the camps and valleys of the mountains the vision which had meant so much for the people of the Silver Bow. The rest was all to his daughter, the document stating that there were no members of his family who had need of anything. The amount of the property was much more than Norton had believed. There were several ranches, with heavy bank deposits and loans, besides the stock.

Three days from the funeral, Norton was called to one of the camps where a caving tunnel had crushed half a dozen men, and he returned to find that Mary had finished all her preparations for the trip East.

A SHOCK OF CORN

The time when she was to leave the valley was at hand. The thought of it increased the hunger in his heart.

Over and over he had tried to make himself believe there was hope, that she had been intended for him in the great cosmic plan, and as often he had come back to the same conclusion: she had loved a man who had not returned it, and now she was leaving the valley to avoid the suffering which the happiness of another would inevitably bring her. The more Norton analyzed the matter from first to last, the more he believed this was the truth.

Yet, as the time of their final separation drew near, he found it increasingly hard to contemplate. He tried to picture the long, empty days with her gone, and knew that the valley could never be the same to him after that. Then he squared his shoulders and his lips shut tight. There was his work—he would lose himself in that.

The last day came and went, and he had not seen her. She had gone to friends, and returned toward evening riding Wildwind very slowly. Norton glimpsed her from his window moving through the dusk. The next day she would take the stage over the range for the last time. He could not endure the thought. His longing for her grew with every minute, and he half decided to risk all in one throw on the chance that, after all, he had been mistaken. It would not be so hard to see her go if she had told him in so many words that she could not care for him. It would be settled permanently if she did, and that would be something.

For an hour he remained at the window watching the stars gather in the vast sky spaces. A sense of

loneliness oppressed him which was near to discouragement. He rose and went downstairs. The Widow Rogers met him in the parlor.

"Mary goes from the valley in the morning," she said sadly.

"I know it, but let me tell you frankly it is not with my consent; I would keep her if I could."

The woman's face brightened.

"So would I, and I know she wants to stay, but it seems there is nothing else for her to do."

"Did she tell you that?" he asked eagerly.

"She did. Why should she want to go?"

"I don't know, only—I thought—"

"I know she would rather stay; it is breaking her heart to leave the valley and the dear old hills. Of course, her aunt is urging her to come. She will set the social world mad back there with her beauty and her strange personality. I know that charm of hers, which is like the mystery of aspen shadows, will cause many a conceited gallant to dip his flag to the very dust."

A keen pain shot through Norton.

"Where is she?" he asked quietly.

"Somewhere in the garden. Why?"

"I haven't told her good-by yet, and I suppose I ought to do that now, as I may be off in the morning before she is awake; I have a trip on hand which will keep me on the trail for a week."

"You feel you must go?"

"Yes, that is what I am here for, you know."

"But I mean to-morrow?"

"There is nothing to keep me here for another day. I might as well be on the move."

The woman looked at him narrowly, her eyes full of a mild reproach.

"Very well, she is out there," she replied, and left the room.

Norton went into the moonlight. Half way down the walk he paused and stood looking out on the meadows, billowing away to the river. Across the road a ground-owl chanted its two-note song: "Farewell—farewell—farewell!"

As the sound ceased, the tinkle of a guitar throbbed along the walk, and Norton stood listening to the low song which accompanied it. When it was done, he approached the spot and saw Mary seated on a rustic bench, the light flecking her hair with warm silver. She stood up as he drew near.

"I did not know you were here," she said in a startled way, one hand grasping the neck of the instrument, while the other seemed to be adjusting the bunch of clover at her throat.

"But I knew you were here, and that is why I came. I expect to leave the valley to-morrow early. I came to tell you good-by."

She started a little.

"I—I was looking at the mountains by moonlight for the last time. I always loved them at this hour, you know."

"How will you endure it when you can't see them?"

"It will be hard. I was born here. I will get very homesick for the trails and dear old Wildwind, and I will want to hear the sound in the pines as it is to-night, soft and sad-like."

"It will be hard to see you go, for we will miss you —all will, for it seems you belong here."

"I—I think I do. But it is best to go."

"Do you feel it is?"

"My father requested it, you remember."

"He thought it best for you, that was why he did."

"Doubtless it is; I could not stay over there alone with the memory of father always with me."

Norton winced. He wondered if she said that to discourage his mood. Nevertheless, he persisted, for the hunger for her was eating within him.

"Is it absolutely necessary for you to go? I am sure your father had no other reason for planning this than a belief that it was best for you under the circumstances."

"He requested it, and—and I have always obeyed him."

"But tell me, do you wish to go?"

He took a step nearer her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She did not resent it, for the touch seemed a preemption which mastered her. He had acted as if she had been falling from a cliff. In fact, it was some such feeling as this which possessed him as he thought of her leaving the valley. In this attitude he waited for her answer.

"I love it here," she replied in a low voice, while he felt her tremble a little under his hand.

"You shall never go if I can keep you," he said feelingly.

"But, my father—it was his—"

The torrent of his feelings gave way. Let the issue be what it might, he would empty his heart of its secret.

"I know I love you, Mary Morrison—what man could help it? Mary! Mary! You must hear me—I

want you, want you!" He had taken her hands, and held them firmly, while he stood above her tall and strong.

She did not try to be free. Rather, there was a little sigh of content, and her eyes sought his face for an instant, then they fell. Her name had sounded very sweet on his lips. She had often wished that she might hear him speak it just that way. The familiarity seemed to brush away the last barrier between them, and Norton was conscious of the coming of her soul to his.

"You say there is nothing else for you to do. Let me solve that. I will keep you—keep you forever."

He drew her toward him, though she struggled like a frightened bird at the promise and delight of his breast which seemed waiting for just her head.

With an effort she restrained him for a moment.

"Are you sure you love me—sure?"

"Who could help it? I have loved you since that night we rode down to the ford."

He drew her to him, and kissed her hair and eyes very gently, then he raised her lips to his.

"You can share my hard life with me, Mary?"

"Was task ever too much for the love of woman? Has there been found a desert too wide or hot for her feet to follow where her adored might lead?"

"Not if she had your loyal soul," he replied.

Later, they went up the walk hand in hand. On the porch they met Mrs. Rogers, who saw the happy fulfillment of all her wishes.

"Mary Morrison stays in the valley," said Norton, taking one of the woman's hands very much as he would had she been his mother.

Brimming tears came to her eyes and fell in big drops across her cheeks.

"I am so glad!" she answered brokenly. Then she kissed Mary and left them to their new joy.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE FULFILLING OF VOWS

ALL was changed for Mary Morrison. Plans for her life were made brand-new.

The joy and wonder of it baffled her. It had come, as the best things of life do, unexpectedly. She had entered her soul's real world—the world of love.

What yesterday had been, to-day would be; what the present held, to-morrow would add interest to. Love, pure and ennobling, was hers. The winds whispered it, the river told it to the willows, and the cottonwoods chattered and gossiped about it the whole length of the valley, and to the world's end.

Norton suddenly found that he could postpone indefinitely his intended trip. Together they rode over the brown mesas or along streams which meandered through sunny, dream-haunted valleys. Sometimes they rambled through the forest, where the shadows spread themselves under the pines.

Once, when they had been far into the night, they were returning through the laurel. The path led through vistas where young firs made green walls to other rooms beyond. In such a place Norton stopped abruptly. His keen ear had caught a sound in the thicket. Scarcely had he come to a standstill than there was a report of a revolver and a bullet warmed his cheek with its close passage. This was followed instantly by another, with a dull sound of something

falling. Norton drew Mary aside, for a man entered the glade and came toward them. Norton advanced to meet him.

"Do you know me?" the man asked, removing his hat and letting the moonlight fall on his face.

"The man wounded near the cave," Norton replied.

"The same. Do you remember the vow I made that night?"

"I do."

"It was half kept when I threw that carcass over the cliff. I have made the rest good to-night. I feared he had done for you, but am glad to see you are all right. He has been following you for weeks, and I have been following him. Tell the girl she need fear him no more. I was in the shade when I drew the bead, but his head was in the light—I know the spot where the bullet struck. Leave him to me—and the wolves."

Norton and Mary left the glade. At the rim he turned and saw the avenger standing where he left him. He raised his hand in farewell, to which the figure responded, then the trees shut him from sight, and the wilderness drew its skirts of silence over another mountain mystery which only a few understood, among whom was Mary Morrison.

Once they galloped off in the pale gray of morning, reaching the summit before the sun rose. From a lofty rock they watched the glory of the sun-rising.

Norton turned to the girl and found her lips parted and her eyes flying banners of inspiration. Beyond stretched the winding Valley of the Silver Bow, and on endlessly rolled and heaved the tumbled ranges.

Suddenly she raised her hand and pointed: "There,

beyond that great ridge is the other valley. On this side is the place where peace was made; I can see the spot from here. Look! There is the Junction, and the church, out of which went the new life, the vision which swept the old feuds from the hearts of the people, and gave my father a soft pillow in the hour of death. It was my mother's dearest hope, and now it is mine. This is the time of daybreak on the mountains. As the sun is splashing the world with light, so do I see that other sunrise in which my soul is exalted as it rolls over other and sublimer hills—*The Mountains of the Morning!*"

After this there was silence between them for a long time. Then they rode down the valley, their cup of happiness brimming full.

One evening Baldwin galloped over to tell Norton that there was to be a little meeting at the church, and that he must be there without fail. When pressed for information, the rider had communicated that which made Norton smile, then break into laughter.

The rumor that Mary Morrison would remain in the valley had called forth many questions. All had been aware that she had intended to go, and they wondered a little at first, but when they saw Norton riding beside her on the mesas, and missed a certain calm sadness from his manner, they understood, and were glad.

When they entered the church all eyes were turned toward them, and there was a ripple of under-talk, which showed that the change of plan was very acceptable.

Tank Campbell grasped Norton's hand with both of his and began to draw it back and forth in a rough

way, while he blurted good-natured talk, in which Alex Sanders joined, getting him by the shoulders.

"Now, don't you think you are some considerable smart, Guide," he bantered. "Why, by the great horn spoons! who'd a-thought that you could a-done such a thing as to change the plans of a young lady who had everything ready for some trip back East. Think of that, will ye! And now, jest to look at it, and cal'late how seemin' near she came of doin' it while all the time we knowed she was a-dying to stay, and all that, while you went around with your eyes shet. Fact, sir, I came mighty nigh takin' a club to ye and knockin' some wits into your dome, for if ye had let that gal leave the valley, I'd a-set fire to the church and killed your ho'se on the ground theory that you didn't have the natural ability to head the common-wealth any longer."

Here Norton put his hand good-naturedly over Campbell's mouth, while Mary went down the aisle and slipped in close to Jenny.

"I know the secret, Mary, and I am so glad! What would I have done without you? There is only one woman in the world who has a right to be happier than you are, and that is unworthy little me." Jenny looked the satisfaction she felt.

"I am happy, Jenny! I fancy the very trees clap their hands over me."

Tears came to the eyes of the girl and she pressed Mary's hand warmly.

Baldwin rose and stated the purpose of the meeting. It was not alone to express their joy at the turn of things which was to keep Mary Morrison in the valley with all that meant to the Guide; there were other

matters which would have their attention. Then he spoke after his own heart, reviewing the work of the man who had come to them in their need, and had broken bread with them beside their camp fires and had made their trails longer in his efforts to do them good. This was a little fellowship meeting, he told them, in which all might express their feelings as they saw fit.

"Isn't he handsome?" Jenny whispered to Mary as Baldwin took his seat and Norton rose.

"Of whom do you speak?" Mary asked, her eyes full of merriment.

"Why, my husband, of course. But that is true of—of—"

"Yes, it is true of both," Mary finished decisively.

"When did you first fall in love with him, Mary?" Jenny leaned close to get the answer.

"I know now it was that first night, when he came out of the cañon. Really, Jenny, I think there never was a time when I did not. It must have all begun back there when the first pair awoke to love—somewhere in the strain it has been mingled like a choice element."

"I always wanted you to love him, and I am so glad it has turned out that way. There is only one nicer looking man in all this world than Wayne Norton." Jenny looked to where Baldwin sat as chairman of the evening.

"He is one in a million, Jenny. But I will not admit him first. All you need to do is to look at the other."

"Really, they look alike, don't you think so, Mary? The same strength and fearless eyes."

"They act alike—they are both good," Mary agreed.

"I wish we looked alike, then I would be more than satisfied; that is, if you did not object, Mary."

"Wouldn't be half as nice looking as you are now, in that case," Mary replied, laughing.

"Just think, we are to be associated together in this great work. O Mary! My fondest dreams never embraced such joy. We will go on long trips together, camp and enjoy the wild, and best of all, do good. Isn't it splendid?"

Something of a surprise awaited the crowd, for no sooner had Norton ceased talking than Tank Campbell shambled into the aisle and, followed by a girl with flashing black eyes, came to the front. Charley Painter and Blake, accompanied by the McMillian girls, came next.

Tank held up his hand for audience:

"It's jest possibly likely that me and Charley and Blake and these here wimmin are causin' some considerable flutter by this little round-up of our own; but I reckon if I states that we have concluded, Katy and me—the rest can speak for themselves—to splice outfits, use one brandin' iron and ear-mark from this out, you'll understand. She's a lot too good for me, and so is these other girls too good for Paint and Blake, but I reckon they done the best they could, and you don't need to blame 'em. And now, seein' that she's consented to make the drive, why, I feel I'm the happiest, luckiest rider in these hills.

"I don't know that any of ye have noticed it exactly, but there's been some little considerable change in me. I'm away and gone better chap than I was last year at this time, when I was a coaxin' Katy and gittin' turned down as I ought to, for she knowed I wasn't

fit for no one to marry. But I'm not what I was. I don't want the dope any more since we run Guber out, and I hain't swore but twice since I jined the society—that is, not that I knows of. And now, seein' that Katy is willin', why, Guide, I reckon you can go ahead."

A storm of hand-clapping greeted this speech, and Jenny went to the girl's side, while Baldwin wedged in close to Campbell. In a few minutes the ceremony was through, and the couples returned to their seats.

Mary drew the girl down to her as she passed.

"You are happy, Kate, and—"

"Changed," she supplied with a brief smile.

Norton and Mary walked home through the night, the smell of the meadows in their nostrils.

They went on, her hand in his, down the dusty road bordered with weeds. Reaching the Rogers home, they did not turn in, but kept on into the mouth of the cañon.

"This shall be our soul union," he said, pausing at a little stream which crossed their path. Taking a Bible from his pocket, he stepped over and turned toward her. Interpreting his meaning she extended her hand and clasped the volume.

"Doctor Parsons writes me that he will be here soon, and then we shall pledge our vows publicly. But marriage is the agreement of two souls to be one, separated forever unto each other. And here, with this bright water between us, rushing on in its answer to the call of the sea, we make our covenant. Till the grass grows no more on the mesas, and the wings of the prairie wind are broken, we are one! For toil, for tears, for pain, for service. My heart's love! I

take you to my life with a wish more pure than this element, which is that I may be to you a worthy strength and protection."

"Yes," she whispered, "to take the message to the loneliest cabin and the farthest camp fire. I will walk beside you as you go, I will share your trials and enter into your labor as far as I can. Please God, I may be a help to you and not a burden, for O, I do love you—I love you so!"

In the night glory they stood transfigured, touched with the finger of God. A bird awoke in a hemlock, sang a measure and then was still.

For one throbbing moment their lips met; then, as if drawn by some unseen presence, they lifted their eyes, while the silent mountains looked down upon them and the moon-washed Valley of the Silver Bow.

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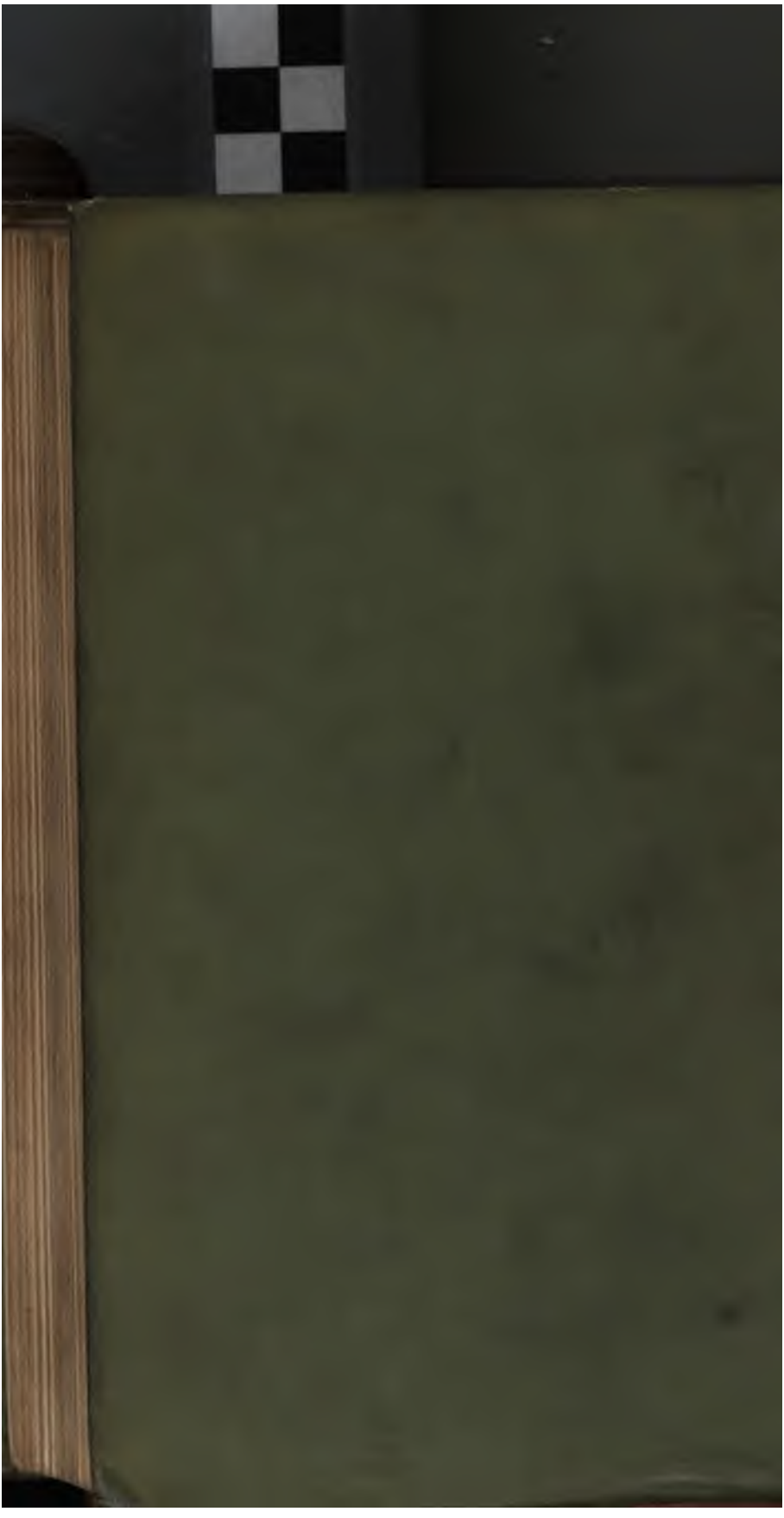
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